

Nature and Heritage Conservation; Who is responsible?

A case study analysis on the role of UNESCO in- and the effects of historical contexts on the recognition and rights of indigenous peoples in East- and South African nations

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Table of content

1.	Introduction.....	2
1.1.	UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHSs) and its contribution to nature conservation.....	2
1.2.	Process of nomination.....	2
1.3.	UNESCO World Heritage sites in Africa.....	3
2.	Problem statement.....	4
3.	Research approach.....	5
3.1.	Research questions.....	5
3.2.	Hypothesis.....	6
3.3.	Methodology and case studies selection.....	6
4.	Theoretical framework.....	7
4.1.	Decolonization theory.....	7
4.1.1.	Decolonization process.....	7
4.1.2.	Self-decolonization.....	8
4.1.3.	Decolonization of nature and heritage.....	8
4.2.	The ladder of participation.....	9
4.2.1.	The concept of participation.....	9
4.2.2.	Effectiveness of participation.....	10
5.	Results.....	10
5.1.	Key findings from the Sacred World Heritage project database.....	10
5.2.	Historical and development analysis of case study nations.....	10
5.3.	Law and governance in case study nations and their World Heritage sites.....	14
5.3.1.	Rwanda.....	15
5.3.1.1.	Rights and recognition of indigenous people.....	15
5.3.1.2.	Nyungwe National Park.....	15
5.3.2.	DRC.....	15
5.3.2.1.	Rights and recognition of indigenous people.....	15
5.3.2.2.	Virunga National Park.....	16
5.3.3.	Kenya.....	16
5.3.3.1.	Rights and recognition of indigenous people.....	16
5.3.3.2.	Mount Kenya National Park.....	16
5.3.3.3.	Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley.....	17
5.3.4.	Tanzania.....	17
5.3.4.1.	Rights and recognition of indigenous people.....	17
5.3.4.2.	Ngorongoro Conservation Area.....	17
5.3.4.3.	Serengeti National Park.....	18
5.3.5.	South Africa.....	18
5.3.5.1.	Rights and recognition of indigenous people.....	18
5.3.5.2.	Maloti-Drakensberg Park.....	18
5.3.5.3.	iSimangaliso Wetlands Park.....	19
6.	Discussion.....	19
7.	Conclusion.....	20
7.1.	Research conclusions.....	20
7.1.1.	Indigenous rights in the historical context of each nation.....	20
7.1.2.	Foreign responsibilities to include/recognize indigenous peoples.....	20
7.2.	Study limitations and future research.....	21
8.	References.....	22
9.	Appendices.....	24

1. Introduction

1.1 UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHSS) and its contribution to nature conservation

UNESCO is one of the key actors in the conservation and (international) recognition of sites with outstanding cultural and/or natural value. In relation to nature conservation, UNESCO's key role is to ensure the continuation of conservation and sustainable management of nature around the globe. However, in the last decades, the impact of international organisations, such as UNESCO, and their social and political responsibility towards the inclusion and exclusion of sites, as well as the people who live with/of/on these sites has been more and more debated. UNESCO and the UN as a whole has taken multiple steps to ensure optimized positive impact on both conservation and societal aspects. This research attempts to look into the contemporary situations at multiple world heritage sites, to be able to analyse possible further steps and the future role of foreign organizations, such as UNESCO, in this responsibility.

1.2 Process of nomination

The idea to establish a trust to protect global heritage dates back to the 60's, but UNESCO's list was only officially introduced at the World Heritage Convention of 1972 (Barros Leal Farias, 2023). By 1978 the first 12 sites were selected and listed (UNESCO, n.d.). Canet et al. (2024) explain that for a property to be accepted on the list, it needs to have confirmed "outstanding universal value", which comes down to meeting at least one of UNESCO's heritage criteria, as listed in Table 1. These criteria are divided into cultural (i to vi) and natural (vii to x) criteria. However, since 2003 one site can comply with criteria from both categories and therefore be considered a 'mixed' heritage site (canet et al., 2024). This research focuses on natural and mixed heritage sites.

Selection criteria	Description
Cultural criteria	(i) To represent a masterpiece of human creative genius
	(ii) To exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design
	(iii) To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared
	(iv) To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history
	(v) To be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change
	(vi) To be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria)
Natural criteria	(vii) To contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance
	(viii) To be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features
	(ix) To be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals
	(x) To contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation

Note: The ("natural") criterion (viii) is the only one that explicitly refers to geological values.

Table 1 - Criteria for the inscription of properties on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Source: Canet, C., Sánchez-Aguirre, D., García-Sánchez, L., & Castañeda-Bastida, E. (2024)

Geological heritage in UNESCO's World Heritage List: A critical review. International Journal of Geoheritage and Parks, p.532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgeop.2024.09.001>

Up to now, the only authorized party to nominate a site is the nation that the site is located in. However, van der Aa (2005) explains that within the nation, a person or group is usually selected to compose a tentative list of sites for UNESCO's next nomination session, which occurs annually or less frequently. The full process of selection for the tentative list, assessment and listing by UNESCO can last up to five or even ten years. For this process to

be set in motion, a nation first needs to provide a complete nomination document, explaining the value of the site, the criterias it meets and a full management plan (van der Aa, 2005). From submission by the nation, the World Heritage Centre checks if all documents are complete, before independent Convention's Advisory Bodies access the documents and sites. For cultural heritage, ICOMOS is responsible for this assessment and for natural heritage, IUCN serves as the assessment and advisory body (Canet et al., 2024). These INGOs' are trusted with the responsibility to assess if a site indeed embodies outstanding universal value and will provide a recommendation to accept or reject a site to the list. However, it is still up to the World Heritage Committee to examine their input and accept or overturn the experts' recommendation. Figure 1 provides a full schematic overview of the nomination process, from the moment of submission by the nation.

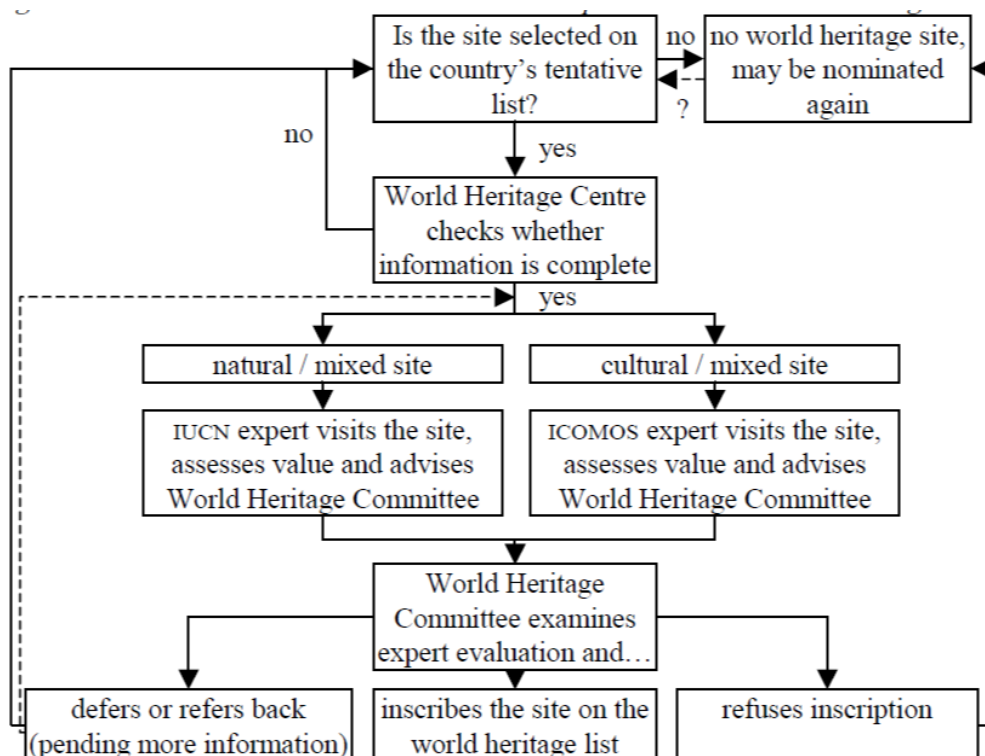
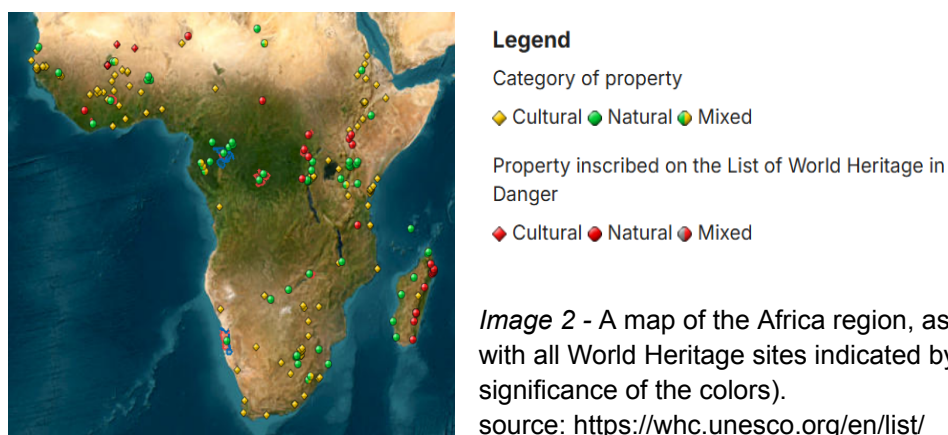


Image 1 - A schematic overview of the listing process, from application by nation to acceptance or rejection by the World Heritage Committee.

Source: Van der Aa, B. J. (2005). Preserving the heritage of humanity? Obtaining world heritage status and the impacts of listing.

1.3 UNESCO World Heritage sites in Africa

As of 2024, the UNESCO world heritage list consists of 1223 sites, located in 168 countries. 108 of these sites are located in the Africa region, as defined by UNESCO. It is important to keep in mind that UNESCO's regions are not based on internationally recognized continents and differentiate between African and Arab states. Therefore, the Northern nations of the African continent, such as Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia are not included in the 'Africa' region. The 108 sites in the Africa region are spread over 36 states (see image 2). 47 of these sites, located in 27 different nations (see appendix 1 for the distribution of these sites) are considered natural or mixed sites, of which 10 are labelled as endangered. With a global total of 15, these 10 make up 67% of all endangered natural or mixed world heritage sites worldwide (UNESCO, n.d.). A quick analysis of the nomination of Africa's natural and mixed sites shows 19 out of 47 sites were assigned World Heritage status in the 80's (see appendix 2 for the full timeline of Africa's World Heritage listings).



This research analyses a selection of these World Heritage sites and the nations they are situated in, aiming to identify the influence of historical development and context on the governance of natural and mixed World heritage sites and the local communities interacting with them. After defining the research objective and questions, the key concepts relevant to this study are defined in a theoretical framework. In the results, a brief data assessment on the economic, political and socio-economic development in the past decades is presented, followed by an analysis of the legal rights of indigenous peoples, for each of the case studies. In the final chapters of this research report, literature and results are compared and analysed, in order to define an answer to the research questions.

2. Problem statement

The previously described nomination process requires a set of actors to provide the right data, connections, knowledge and valuation. Firstly, a group of people, often researchers and officials on the site, are selected to write the required documents and gather (history) data on the conservation, management and value of the site. Secondly, the UNESCO board will decide which applications are complete and select sites to be assessed for further nomination. Next, the selected “experts” from the advisory board (IUCN or ICOMOS) assess the outstanding universal value of the site and provide a recommendation for listing, as well as required changes or conservation needs. Beyond this outstanding universal value, the site is assessed by a group of experts on the following aspects: the current and potential threats to values, the effectiveness of protection and management, and the current state and trend of values (Dulias, 2022). Lastly, the World Heritage Committee has a final vote for the rejection or acceptance of a site to gain World Heritage status. Where National leaders and site managers hold the responsibility of inclusion, the first stages of this process even provide a window of opportunity for them to exclude surrounding communities. This could be from the management plan and stakeholders map provided in the application, as well as from participating in the application and valuation process itself. Ideally, in the assessment done by IUCN, the inclusion and exclusion of local communities from the conservation and use of the site are included in the assessment of the cultural and spiritual value of the site. However, a natural site is mainly assessed on its biodiversity and conservation values and once a community is left out of the stakeholders map in the application, their inclusion is hardly operationalized in the following stages of the process. Therefore, the body drafting the initial application holds a responsibility to include indigenous people that rely on the site for their livelihoods.

UNESCO's concept of "outstanding universal value" is critiqued and contested in many scientific literature (Bear (2020), Barros Leal Feldman (2023), Canet et al. (2024), Datillo et al. (2024), Titchen (1996), Von Droste (2011)). Bear (2020) describes UNESCO's valuation process as the "cool" authentication of heritage sites. "Hot" authentication would be through a rather bottom-up and participatory approach, recognizing more of the dynamic, multilayered and socially constructed values of a site, by a variety of stakeholders (Bear, 2020). The difference between these valuation approaches are a matter of who is provided with the right to define value and UNESCO's "cool" authentication can therefore be seen as one-sided, unjust or even neocolonial. Not only the power to evaluate and conceptualize the significance of a site throughout the listing process, but also the entire concept of an "international", read 'Western', body valuating, listing and interfering in the management and conservation of a site of local significance can be considered European-biased or even neo-colonial. For example, Datillo et. al. (2024) emphasize on the power UNESCO provides to so-called experts and scholars from the Global North, throughout the listing process, as well as the following role in overseeing the management and conservation, representing the Western ideas of heritage. Similar criticism is addressed not only to UNESCO's processes, but the work of the UN and similar institutions on a larger scale (John et al., 2023). On a continent such as Africa, where colonialism has had a great impact on all contemporary economies, politics and social structures, any processes about evaluation, management and conservation of land, property and culture is sensitive, especially when executed by foreign parties. Therefore, it is key for international initiatives and organisations, such as UNESCO, to be cautious of their role and impact in the Africa region. The increasing criticism on such organisations and processes also has made those concerning organisations more aware and conscious of their role and impact. So too has UNESCO, and the UN as a whole, implemented initiatives to improve, which will be taken into account in the conclusion and recommendations of this research.

As presented above, the concepts of power and valuation in relation to the listing and management of World Heritage sites is contested. Especially on a continent as historically challenged and dominated by foreign actors, further involvement or authentication by organisations such as UNESCO easily affect socio-economic structures and development, to an extent it is even labeled as neo-colonial. This research therefore aims to identify the potential role and responsibilities of such organisations, in their involvements in management and governance of PAs and local communities. The exact research questions to guide this analysis are defined in the following chapter.

3. Research approach

3.1 Research questions

Contemporary socio-economic and political structures are often highly influenced by historical influences, thus in the cases of African nations including colonial history. The responsibility to include and recognize all groups and members of society lies not only with the national governments, but possibly with other stakeholders in the PA management systems as well. Based on the above illustrated problem statement of neocolonialism of power and knowledge through international institutions, such as UNESCO, the following two research questions have been formulated to guide this research practise:

1. *How does the historical contexts of African nations affect the roles and rights of Indigenous People in the management of natural and mixed World Heritage sites?*
2. *What responsibilities towards the inclusion/recognition of local custodians in the management of PAs should the processes of foreign (nature) conservation organisations, like UNESCO, embody?*

3.2 Hypothesis

From personal experience and knowledge, through prior research as well as the experiences of living in East Africa over the past ten years, I am expecting the findings of this research to result in the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Contemporary politics and social structures in Africa are highly influenced by colonial intervention and history. Hence, when marginalization of indigenous peoples is inherited from colonial structures, it can therefore only be minimized through true (self)decolonization and development of African nations.
2. On a continent that has been affected by colonial and other foreign intervention as much as Africa, the work and involvement of any international organisation should be minimized in their overall impact on social structures, conflict and decolonization processes.

3.3 Methodology and case studies selection

At the first stage of this research practice, my key focus was to contribute to the database of the Sacred World Heritage project. The aim of this database is to provide complete and clear data on the World Heritage sites worldwide, their management and documentation and the recognition of local custodians and sacred sites within these World Heritage sites. After interactions with the initiators and prior contributors of the database, I added the basic information on yet missing natural and mixed sites worldwide, and focussed on the detailed data of sites in the Africa region. This data was primarily sourced from the UNESCO World Heritage list and the documents they provide, such as nomination, assessment and management files. Unfortunately, a language barrier on my side, when available data was solely available in French, forced me to select and focus on the sites that (also) entailed English documents. For the remaining 29 sites (see image 3), a further literature analysis allowed more detailed information about sacred sites, local custodianship and tourism on the sites to be added.

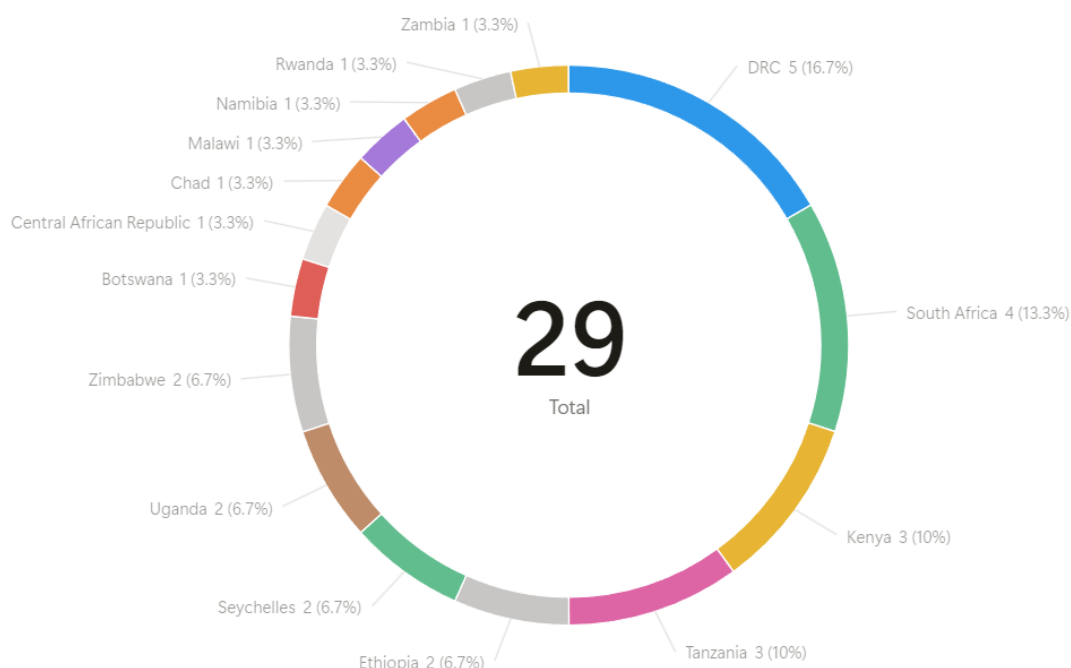


Image 3 - Count of Africa's World Heritage sites per country, documented in English
Source: Sacred World Heritage project database.

Based on the availability of relevant data in literature and reports and a representative mixture of natural and mixed sites for the Africa region, the most following case studies were selected for this research:

Site name	Country	Site type	WH status
1. Virunga NP	DRC	Natural	1979
2. Bale Mountains NP	Ethiopia	Natural	2023
3. Lake System Great Rift Valley	Kenya	Natural	2011
4. Mount Kenya NP	Kenya	Natural	1997
5. iSimangaliso wetlands park	South Africa	Natural	1999
6. Maloti-Drakensberg park	South Africa & Lesotho	Mixed	2000
7. Ngorongoro CA	Tanzania	Mixed	1979
8. Serengeti NP	Tanzania	Natural	1981
9. Victoria Falls	Zimbabwe & Zambia	Natural	1989
10. Nyungwe NP	Rwanda	Natural	2023
11. Okavango Delta	Botswana	Natural	2014

Since this research requires a deeper understanding of colonial history and social and national development afterwards, I had to make cuts in the number of nations I could include. Therefore, the Okavango delta (Botswana), Victoria falls (Zimbabwe/Zambia) and Bale mountains (Ethiopia) (marked in grey) were removed, limiting the research area to DRC, Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa. In the final selection, Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa are more represented than DRC and Rwanda, due to their relatively higher contribution of sites in the Africa region (see image 4). Ideally, the same would be done for DRC, but the remaining sites in DRC were lacking proper available sources. In the second stage of this research practice, a literature research was conducted to assess the 8 selected sites, mainly focussing on the history and development of the nations and the recognition of indigenous people and local custodians in both the management of the sites, as well as the national laws. These results are presented and interpreted in chapter 5 and 6. First, the next chapter will provide a theoretical framework on relevant concepts that will be used to answer above stated research questions.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Decolonization theory

The framing of foreign involvement in socio-economic structures in Africa as “neocolonial” raises a question of what decolonization truly means, and to which extent African nations are truly decolonized and independent. The following section will define the concept and process of decolonization, as well as its relation to the governance and conservation of nature and heritage.

4.1.1 Decolonization process

Historical, as well as contemporary colonialism features the act of domination over one community by another person, party or community. Boucher (2019) differentiates between direct domination and indirect domination, which rather refers to structural denial of rights, ownership or narrative. Neo-colonial practices follow along the lines of this indirect domination and can go as far as alienating communities from their history and heritage (Boucher, 2019). However, with a growing awareness of this concept, a growing consciousness is developing among people and organisations. The concept of decolonization has primarily been understood as the physical removal of a dominating power. However, Collins (2016) explains that for a nation and its societies to truly decolonize, five external and internal stages have to

be passed. Firstly, the most commonly understood stage, the flag-independence of the nation. Secondly, the stage of self-determination, where national power structures develop, yet still based on colonial heritage structures, and society polarizes. Thirdly, the stage of liberal Internationalism, in which the nation claims equality to other neighboring and Global Nations. Fourthly, internal structures develop independently and nationalistic alternatives are being produced, such as new constitutions and political systems. Lastly, once a Nation has structurally stabilized, minority groups rise, resulting in anti-oppression rebellion. Hence, for a nation to be developed enough to recognize and remove oppression of local communities, it needs to first structurally change within and (re)define its own “personality” and “culture”, including its strengths and weaknesses, and its norms and values. Therefore, decolonization can be seen as a process of globalization, moving away from Western- or European norms and practices. Understandably, a risk in the last stage Collins (2016) describes is the opportunity rebellion and oppression provides for neo-colonial initiatives, where the “developed” world jumping in to “help out” or “protect” what they consider at risk in “underdeveloped” nations, mainly through interference in economics and politics, returning the decolonizing nation to a stage of dependency, debt or even control by others.

4.1.2 Self-decolonization

When narratives, history or epistemological assumptions about race, class or culture remain colonized, postcolonialism requires the decolonization of representation (Collins 2016). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986) introduced the concept of ‘decolonization of the mind’, which explains that for true decolonization, an individual and internal process following the physical removal of dominating power is even more crucial. A related and commonly-known concept in (Pan)African societies is ‘ubuntu’, which Boucher (2019) refers to as the constructive resilience and quest to reclaim the identity and history of the African continent. Both concepts refer to the internal beliefs and understanding Africans have of their identity, history and value, propagated by treatments and representations during colonialism. To break this generational inheritance, it is crucial for Africans to learn about and reconnect with (suppressed) local histories, philosophies and knowledge (Boucher, 2019).

4.1.3 Decolonization of nature and heritage

In many parts of the world, Africa being no exception, the establishment of Protected Areas (PAs) has been supported by schemes of displacement and separation of local communities from their native lands. This understanding of local communities and livelihoods as a threat to conservation of the environment and the need to save African nature from the Africans themselves, is in academics referred to as environmental colonialism (Moyo, 2023). In regards to nature and heritage conservation and the understanding of the role of local communities in this field, the process of decolonization is mainly called for in three sections, namely “depoliticization, decomplexification, and representation” (Bluwstein, 2021). Conservation that excludes the local history and opportunities for local communities to participate, based on their own livelihood requirements and knowledge, hence acknowledging the original stewards of the lands and sites, is still considered neo-colonial and therefore harmful for both the communities and the sites itself (Schneider, 2023). In many realities on the African continent, the alienation of local communities from their heritage complicates the attempts to decolonize nations and their heritages. This is often a result of heritage management systems being adopted from prior colonial structures and understanding of the landscapes (Bolin and Nkusi, 2022). Rwanda has done a great job in their attempts to decolonize their (cultural) heritage, by adjusting their conservation to local needs and knowledge, as well as using places of representation, such as museums, to reform the narrative and understanding of history to a local perspective (Bolin and Nkusi, 2022). As McDonnell and Regenvanu (2022) state “At its

core, the practice of decolonial research and activism involves a commitment to the principles of Indigenous self-determination and to the repatriation of Indigenous land.” Hence, for an international initiative to contribute to the process of decolonialism, rather than neocolonialism, it is key to acknowledge and respect local knowledge and tenure rights.

4.2 The ladder of participation

To ensure recognition and acknowledgement of local knowledge and rights, a system of true participation and co-management is crucial. Leonard and Duma (2024) define co-management as the shared power, responsibilities and benefits among stakeholders, in the attempt to enhance conservation alongside community development and peace. However, on the African continent, these kinds of schemes are historically not common and rarely implemented nowadays. Some countries, such as South Africa, have tried to legally restore injustices from colonial pasts through such schemes, but in practice, the shared power and benefits is still hardly found, due to lack of true participation opportunities for local peoples (Leonard and Duma, 2024).

4.2.1 The concept of participation

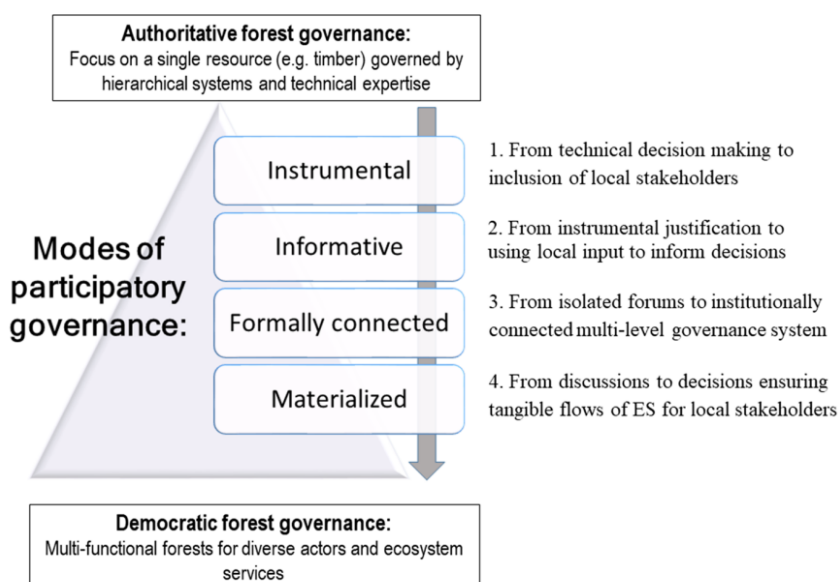


Image 4 - The ladder of participation, from authoritative (forest) governance to democratic (forest) governance.

Source: Sarkki, S., Parpan, T., Melnykovich, M., Zahvoyska, L., Derbal, J., Voloshyna, N., & Nijnik, M. (2019). *Beyond participation! Social innovations facilitating movement from authoritative state to participatory forest governance in Ukraine*. *Landscape Ecology*, 34, 1601-1618.

Macura et al. (2014) explain that the concept of participation can be rather ‘passive’, referring to the attendance of a meeting by a participant, or ‘active’, referring to proactive engagement and self-mobilization of the participant. However, this does not mean it is a dichotomous concept. In literature and practice, the concept of inclusion has been referred to in many ways; “stakeholder inclusion, interactive decision-making, deliberative engagement, civil dialogue, joined-up government, interactive governance, deliberative democracy, etc.” (Ianniello et al., 2019). The rate of engagement of a participant can range from ‘informed’ to ‘empowered’. To understand this scale, the ladder of participation was developed; a tool aiming to enhance emancipation beyond political convenience, divided into four modes/fields of participatory governance, namely ‘instrumental’, ‘informative’, ‘formally connected’ and ‘materialized’. By

enhancing the level of participation in each mode, a governance system can shift from (passive) authoritative governance to (active) democratic governance (see image 4).

4.2.2 *Effectiveness of participation*

Although scientific literature indicates that local participation in conservation results in positive effects on social and ecological outcomes, other researchers equally suggest that participation can interfere with conservation outcomes and attitudes. However, research by Macura et al. (2014) shows, when participation is done poorly, it can have negative consequences resulting in loss of trust and proper participation at least has a positive effect on the development of conservation knowledge. Sarkki et al. (2019) describe the effectiveness of participation as conditional to the transparency and involvement in early processes, mainly related to planning and decision-making, requiring institutionalized participation through bottom-up innovations and the employment and respect of locals as “experts” and decision-makers. Hence, structural and sustainable participatory forest governance requires a shift in attitudes of managers and scientists to perceive local expertise and knowledge as legitimate and valuable (Sarkki et al., 2019). At times, participation develops through self-motivation of local groups, but still requires a democratic governing party to “allow” participation and acknowledge the value of local knowledge.

5. Results

5.1 *Key findings from the Sacred World Heritage project database*

Before addressing the findings on the selected case studies, the first stage of database contribution revealed the following three findings relevant to this and future research on the management and governance of social dynamics and local communities in and around World Heritage sites. Firstly, since 1992 UNESCO officially recognizes ‘cultural landscapes’ as a new category of World Heritage sites, which meant the contribution of indigenous communities in the shaping of a natural landscape, as well as their continuous relationship with the sites, could now be recognized in the considered outstanding universal value of the site. Ideally, a site was thus no longer to be seen as purely natural, social or mixed, but as a product of the interactions between the social and natural world living in and around the site (Schaaf and Rossler, 2012). And as much as Schaaf and Rossler (2012) state that by 2012, 66 sites were already categorized as ‘cultural landscape’, up to now, this category is not used in the official World Heritage list by UNESCO. Even sites which are obviously landscapes that are shaped by human-nature interactions, such as de Beemster (the Netherlands), are simply appointed to be mixed, and therefore lacking recognition of the value and importance of these interactions. Secondly, many nomination files and management plans mention the physical local usage of sites for wood, water, grazing or hunting, but almost never recognize any spiritual relation between local communities and the site. There is a slight increase in social or spiritual value of a site in mixed sites compared to natural ones, but this difference is more visible in the criteria descriptions in the nomination files than the actual management plans. Thirdly, when management plans mention community participation or involvement, it is often further explained as training them and ‘raising awareness’, mainly meant to make them part of tourism structures or reduce poaching or access. This portrays a rather top-down power of governance and valuation of the site, where communities are to be controlled, rather than recognized as co-managers or custodians.

5.2 *Historical and development analysis of case study nations*

The following findings are based on data sourced from World Bank Group (n.d.). The selected indicators are ‘governmental effectiveness’, ‘political stability’, ‘population growth’, ‘population size’, ‘GDP per capita’, ‘life expectancy at birth’ and ‘(arrivals of) international tourism’. This

data allows an overview of the development, stability, population and tourism in each case study nation over the past 50 years or less, depending on the available data.

Governmental effectiveness is a measure of the quality of public services and its independence of political pressures, as well as the credibility of policies. *Political stability* reflects the absence of (politically-motivated) violence, as well as internal political instability. Both the governmental effectiveness and political stability factors are expressed in a percentile rank (between 0 and 100), to allow a comparative analysis between the five case study nations. World Bank Group explains “percentile ranks have been adjusted to correct for changes over time in the composition of the countries covered by the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)”.

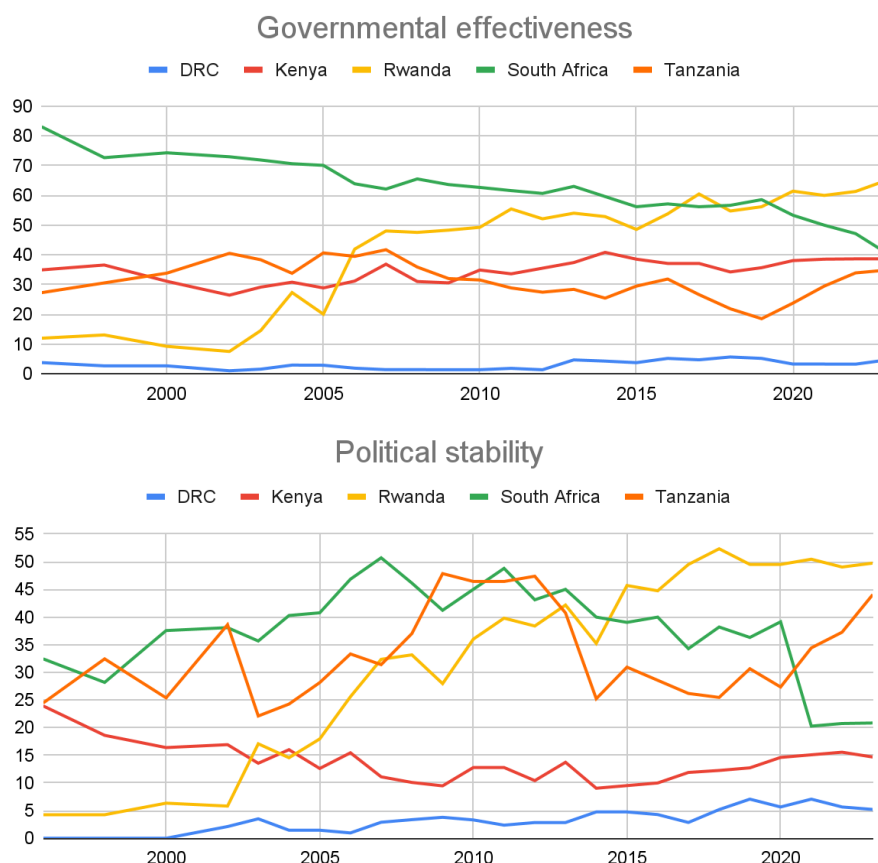


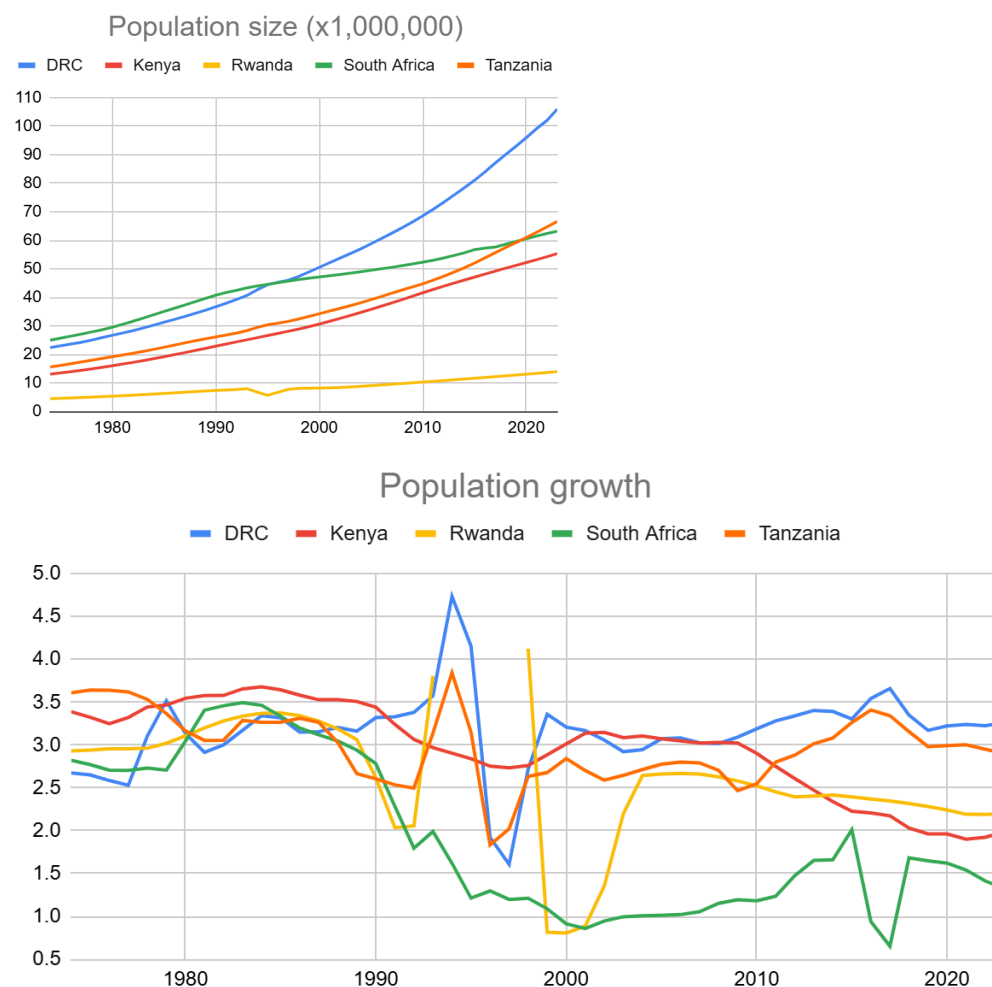
Figure 5 - The governmental effectiveness (5a) and political stability (5b) between 1996 and 2023.

Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

Figure 5a shows how the governmental effectiveness in South Africa has only decreased over the past 30 years, where especially Rwanda has picked up greatly since 2002. The other three nations have experienced some ups and downs in their governmental effectiveness, but have not become significantly more effective over the past 30 years. Figure 5b however shows a similar growth in political stability in Rwanda, from 2002 onwards, but also great ups and downs in political stability in Tanzania. The data of Kenya and South Africa are showing a rather decreasing trend in political stability. DRC seems in both graphs not to go through much development, but however slightly improves in both indicators, especially in the last 10 years.

Analysing *population size and growth* allows an understanding of how many people live in the case study nations, as well as the relative growth, to be able to compare them. Figure 6a shows only South Africa has had a much lower increase in population size since 1991, but especially DRC, Kenya and Tanzania have grown rapidly in population size. As of 2023,

Rwanda by far has the smallest population (close to 14 million) and DRC about 106 million. The population growth in figure 6b shows ups and downs in growth in South Africa, and even more obvious spikes in Rwanda, DRC and Tanzania. The extreme spikes in Rwanda (between 1994 and 1997) are left out, to maintain readability of the graph, but are of key relevance in understanding the dynamics of the population of Rwanda and its neighboring countries in this period. The actual data of these dates are presented in figure 6c and can be explained by the Rwandan genocide in 1994-1995. This event also explains the peaks in DRC and Tanzania around those years, due to refugee migration out of Rwanda into neighboring countries and, in the years afterwards, back into Rwanda. In 1998, Rwanda's population recovered to around 8 million.



	1994	1995	1996	1997
Rwanda	-16.13	-17.99	16.75	14.50

Image 6 - The population size (a) and growth (b) between 1974 and 2023, and the exact population growth in Rwanda from the start of the genocide (1994) up to relative recovery (1998)(c).

Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the sum of added value in the economy of a country, per year, which makes it possible to compare nations with different amounts of inhabitants. Image 7 therefore gives an indicator of the prosperity and economic development of each case study nation (Investopedia, 2024). The data on the Y-axis is transformed into a logarithmic scale, to be able to visualize the data among different scales in one graph. The graph shows DRC has

faced a great decline in economic development from 1988 and is still in the process of recovery. However, the priorly presented population size can explain this decline due to minimal economic growth whilst great increases in population size. In the Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa, the economic growth has been relatively stable, where Rwanda has exponentially grown since a few years after the genocide, especially from 2002 up to date.

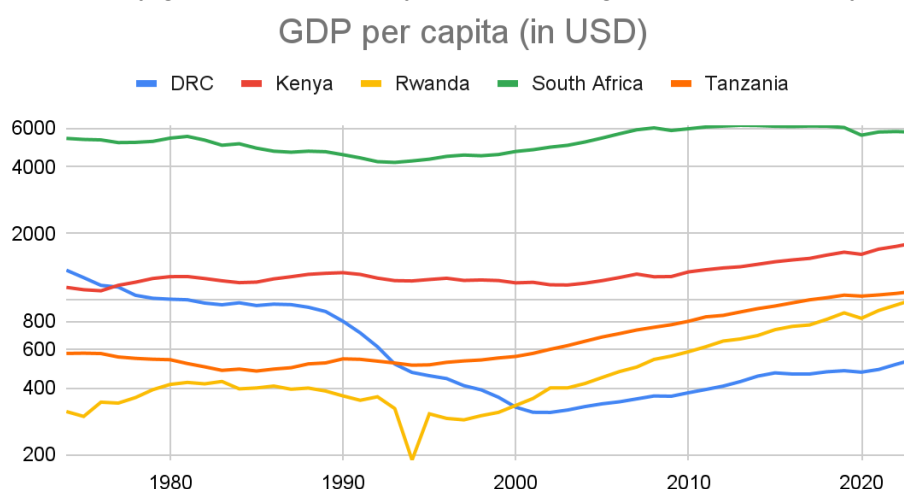


Image 7 - Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (in USD) from 1974 to 2023.

Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

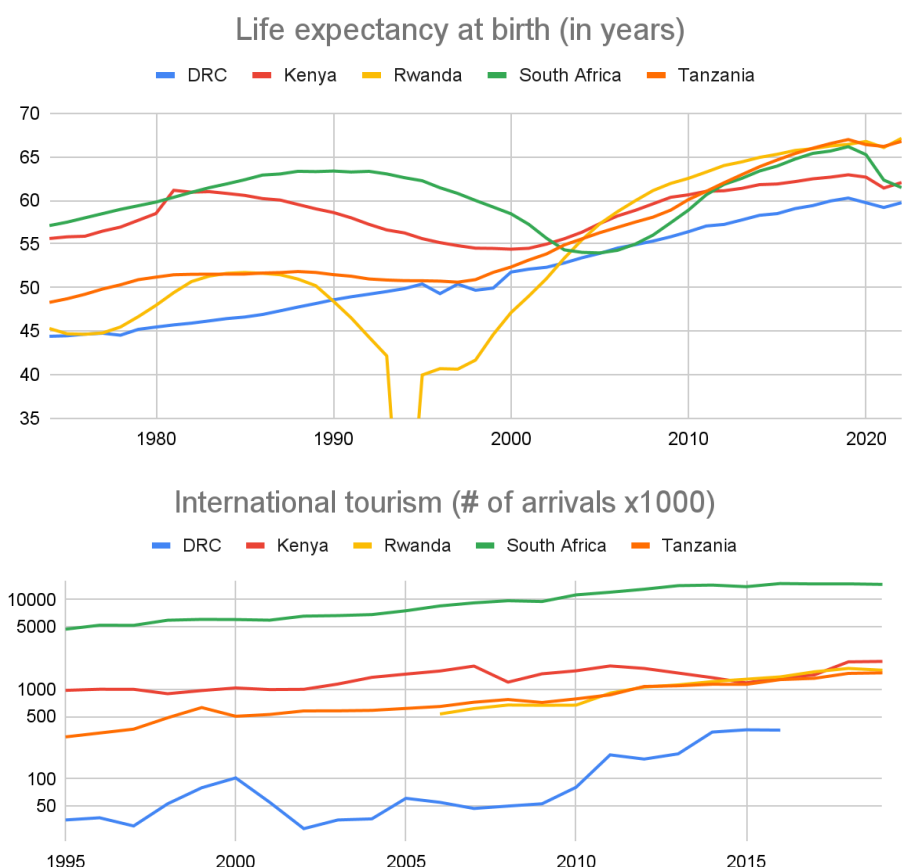


Image 8 - The life expectancy at birth (in years) between 1974 and 2023 (a) and the number of international inbound tourism in the case study nations since 1995 (b).

Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

The final two relevant indicators to national development and stability are *life expectancy* and *international tourism*. Life expectancy at birth is the expected age a person will reach, if all

mortality patterns in the nation would remain the same as they are at the birth of this person. Therefore, it reflects the quality of life and mortality rates in the nation and is commonly used to analyze and compare the health status and socioeconomic development across nations. Analyzing trends in international tourism provides an indication of the internationally considered safety in a country, but also includes the development of infrastructure and attractiveness of the nation and its tourism attractions.

Image 8a shows the trends in life expectancy in DRC to be most stable, with a strong increase from 44 years in 1974 to almost 60 in 2023. Tanzania and Rwanda have also both experienced a strong growth in life expectancy from 1998 onwards. South Africa and Kenya have however been more fluctuating, with even a decline in the past years in South Africa. International tourism has however been continuously increasing in South Africa, as well as in Tanzania. DRC is less stable and clearly far behind in number in its tourism, compared to the other case study nations.

5.3 Law and governance in case study nations and their World Heritage sites

Nation	Rwanda	DRC	Kenya	Tanzania	South Africa
UNDRIP recognized?	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Recognition of indigenous peoples in law	No recognition of the existence of indigenous people	Indigenous people legally recognized	Lots of laws for other minorities, but little recognition of indigenous communities. New 2010 constitution	No legal recognition of indigenous communities	Indigenous groups partially recognized and legal attempts to implement co-management frameworks in PAs
Recognition of indigenous peoples in practice	All forms of governance (colonial, state and private) aim to keep local communities out	Many local groups are not considered 'indigenous'	not only a step in decolonization, but also towards recognition of local communities and their rights	Initially first nation to attempt coexistence of pastoralists in PAs, but centre of conflict in last decade	2 waves of reversing land claims in 60s-80s and 2013, aiming to undo colonial and apartheid harms
Political stability & effective governance	Great growth since 2002	Poor stability and effectiveness in governance and politics	Low till early 2000's, but slowly picking up in last decades	Ups and downs in past decades	Decreasing stability and effectiveness
Population size/growth	Greatly affected by 1994' genocide, but life expectancy has 1.5x in past 30 years	Rapidly growing population	Relatively slow growing population	Relatively stable population	Relatively stagnated population size
Life expectancy		Life expectancy and tourism is slowly increasing	Stability in life expectancy, GDP and tourism	Great increase in life expectancy (from 48 to 67 in last 50 years)	Very high life expectancy, GDP and tourism activity in comparison to other case study nations
Tourism	Picking up since early 2000's			Steadily increasing	
GDP		Very poor GDP, both relative to self as other case study nations			

Table 2 - a summary table of the findings and results of this research, per case study nation

This chapter analyses the law and governance at each of the case study nations. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) collects data on the indigenous peoples in every country, their numbers, national recognition and rights. Based on their data, a profile of indigenous laws and governance is set up per case study nation. For every nation, a short section on the governance and management of the selected WH sites and the local communities living in and around them follows. A summary of these results are presented in table 2, followed by the detailed descriptions of these findings in the following sections of this chapter.

5.3.1 RWANDA

5.3.1.1 *Rights and recognition of indigenous people*

The following section is based on data sourced from the 'Rwanda' page on the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) website. As of 2023, Rwanda's total population consists of about 14 million people, of which between 25 to 30 thousand are considered part of the Batwa community. The Batwa people are Internationally known as 'Twa', 'Pygmies' or 'forest people' and are often seen as second-class citizens of the nation. In an attempt to reduce ethnic violence and enhance the united national identity, the Rwandan government banned the use of ethnic profiling post-genocide. In the Rwandan law, especially since 2001, the usage of terms related to ethnicity or indigenusness is also banned and the usage of such dividing terms in social settings is criminalized. Hence, it is not allowed to group or collect data on any ethnic-related topics and therefore the clear numbers, but more importantly, the challenges of the Batwa community are not known or addressed in any official settings and the Batwa people are facing great socio-economic disadvantages. In short, where Rwanda stands out for their decolonization of cultural heritage and history (Bolin and Nkusi, 2022), they are still lacking acknowledgement of local communities, also in the management of tourism and conservation.

5.3.1.2 *Nyungwe National Park*

Far before the end of Belgium's colonization of Rwanda in 1962, namely since 1933, Nyungwe forest was reserved as a Natural protected area. Gross-Camp et al. (2015) draw a timeline of its development since, starting with the government of Rwanda adding a bufferzone to the forest in 1984 and since 2023, it is officially a Natural world Heritage site. The core purpose of the bufferzone was to reduce the contact between local communities and the unique flora and fauna of the forest. In Rwanda, as in most African countries, the conservation of nature is funded and managed by the private sector. Since 2011, the bufferzone was privatized and over the last decade, this now mature bufferzone has been the playfield for community involvement and local stakeholder initiatives. The effects of privatization on the rights and access of local communities are rather mixed. Where some actors battle for the sole protection of nature and biodiversity, other (often smaller) actors advocate for the protection of social interests in and around the forest. However, by law, both the forest and the buffer zone are protected from any human activity (Gross-Camp et al., 2015).

5.3.2 DRC

5.3.2.1 *Rights and recognition of indigenous people*

The following section is based on data sourced from the 'Democratic Republic of Congo' page on the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) website. When speaking of pygmies in DRC, it refers to not only the Batwa people, but also the Mbuti and Baka societies. All three communities are legally accepted and recognized in laws and regulations of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Since 2007, DRC has adopted UN's Declaration on the

Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and in June 2016, indigenous community leaders were first invited to take part in multi-stakeholder dialogues to promote the implementation of the UNDRIP. Further progressing, in 2020 and 2022, the government of DRC further included the legal protection and promotion of indigenous rights to land, resources and identity in their national laws. The role and contribution of indigenous peoples in the protection of forests, biodiversity and marine ecosystems is also recognized in these laws. In this regard, DRC is a leading example in the International and Continental community in their legal recognition of indigenous communities and their rights. However, the following example of Virunga NP also indicates the greater issue of legal recognition of groups beyond indigeneity.

5.3.2.2 Virunga National Park

Kniewel (2024) presents the timeline of Virunga NP's establishment. When Virunga was established as the first national park in Africa, in 1925, by that time known as 'Albert National Park', it was meant to be closed off for most human activity, including tourism, in an attempt to protect the mountain gorillas and their habitat. However, due to the 'primitive' nature of the pygmy culture, they were considered rather part of nature than a threat to its conservation. From the late 1930's, up to the time of independence in 1960, much of conservation efforts in DRC were left in the hands of colonial regimes, resulting in strict and harsh defences against the access and usage of natural resources by local communities (Kniewel, 2024). According to Dumont et al. (2019), up to today, most ethnic groups living in and around Virunga NP heavily rely on the natural resources of the park for their survival and where pygmy tribes are considered part of nature, other ethnic groups, not recognized under the 'indigenous' label in laws either, lack the acknowledgement as stakeholders of the national park. Over the past decades, national and international initiatives have attempted to enhance both social and conservational needs through capacity-development spaces, women's trainings and bottom-up engagement and participatory approaches. Especially workshops addressing women's roles in agroforestry have proven effective in the upscaling and inclusivity of conservation initiatives (Dumont et al., 2019).

5.3.3 KENYA

5.3.3.1 Rights and recognition of indigenous people

The following section is based on data sourced from the 'Kenya' page on the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) website. The indigenous communities of Kenya consist of a large range of hunter-gatherer, as well as pastoralist groups, yet Kenya has not (yet) adopted the UNDRIP to give recognition and rights to these groups. However, Kenya has ratified a whole other range of human rights and anti-discrimination conventions. Besides, the fourth chapter of the Kenyan constitution includes a bill that integrates international law into the country's legal framework, ensuring the protection of marginalized and minority groups by safeguarding their rights to freedom of expression, communication, and access to information. The biggest changes were adopted when Kenya shifted from the colonial-heritage constitution to their renewed national constitution in 2010, which recognizes and respects customary laws and land rights, as well as the need for community consultations in the planning stages of land-use shifts (Abraham et al., 2014). This shift away from colonial politics and heritage is in line with the fourth stage of decolonialism, as defined by Collins (2016).

5.3.3.2 Mount Kenya National Park

Gazetted in 1932, Mount Kenya has been recognized as a site of national value long before independence. Nyongesa and vacik (2019) outline that, especially by the members of the Kikuyu tribe, the mountain and multiple tree species that grow on it are considered sacred and are believed to connect the community members to gods and ancestors. The main threats to

the sustainability of this site and its resources are tourism, farming, human-wildlife conflict and resource depletion. The latest management plan was developed in 2010, in collaboration with various stakeholders, including managers, regional officers and local representatives. This management plan consists of seven strategies focused on climate change mitigation, protection of water catchments, education and research, stakeholder involvement, biodiversity conservation, timber production, and community interests (Nyongesa and Vacik, 2019).

5.3.3.3 Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley

The Kenyan Rift valley is home to a large number of ethnic groups, among which the Endorois and Maasai, which are nationally recognized as indigenous communities. Abraham et al. (2014) explains that for these communities, the Rift valley is not only of economic, but also social and spiritual significance. Up to independence, native reserves were under the management of native communities, but all these lands were converted into so-called 'Trust Lands' from 1963 onwards, giving authority over the reserves to nationally designated bodies. Ten years later, most remaining indigenous lands were claimed for game reserves and expansions of the valley region, accompanied by the removal of these indigenous communities and denial of further access to the lakes and valleys. Inevitably, this resulted in a halt to local livelihoods, culture and rituals, forcing the communities to challenge the legalities of these treatments in courts. After almost 20 years of discouraging court rulings, in 2009, the first ruling in favour of the Endorois people marked the start of their movement for traditional and customary rights of indigenous people in Africa. The World Heritage nomination of Kenya's lake system in the great rift valley in 2011 yet again reflects the lack of recognition of the Endorois people as custodians of the site. In both the national nomination and the IUCN evaluation process, they were excluded as rights' holders and not consulted when defining the outstanding universal value of the site. Hence, the contemporarily adopted value of the WH site does solely reflect the conservational value as defined by state parties, such as Kenya Wildlife Services (Abraham et al., 2014).

5.3.4 TANZANIA

5.3.4.1 Rights and recognition of indigenous people

The following section is based on data sourced from the 'Tanzania' page on the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) website. Some African governments, Tanzania being an example, proved more willing than the former colonial regimes to determinedly shield their heritage from local communities around. Despite Tanzania's adaptation of UNDRIP since 2007 onto national legislation and policies, the general existence of indigenous groups within Tanzania is not recognized by its government. Therefore, indigenous groups such as the pastoralists Maasai are still denied any legislative protection, such as the freedom of movement, customary laws, or access to resources. Land grabs in attempts to expand conservancies and national parks are a common issue between the conservationists and local communities, completely undermining the pastoralists livelihoods of these communities. In 2023, there was a lot of national and international attention for the indigenous Maasai in their efforts to claim their rights to access their lands, sacred sites and heritage. However, if not contributing to tourism or conservation, Maasai activities were dismissed as unlawful and irrelevant.

5.3.4.2 Ngorongoro Conservation Area

The Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) marked in 1959 the first multiple land-use conservation area in Tanzania. This meant pastoralist groups were allowed their human activities, alongside the conservation of wildlife, since the culture of these groups already evolved around a coexistence with the landscape and its wildlife (Linuma et al., 2022).

However, Linuma et al. (2022) explain that the polygamous aspect of their culture also resulted in rapidly growing population sizes and therefore increasing human-wildlife conflicts and demands for natural resources. The counter response from the Tanzanian government and NCA managers were stricter policies and a ban on poaching, as well as ritual killings, enforced through (violent) patrols.

5.3.4.3 Serengeti National Park

The Serengeti faces similar human pressures from increasing populations living in and around the national park, putting more pressure on the landscape and park boundaries. This has in the last decades resulted in the Serengeti becoming East Africa's centre of conflict and policy enforcement between villagers, tourism operators and park managers. At the moment, this NP has the strictest bans and restrictions in terms of resource access and usage by local people in the whole of East Africa. The forceful evictions and other enforcements have pushed villagers to go as far as resentments of conservation policies and requests for degazettement of the park. Current initiatives attempt to align local behaviours with conservation goals, rewarded with local beneficiary schemes are not resulting in the desired effects due to lack of alignment with local needs and livelihoods. Kisingo et. al (2016) state the only sustainable and peaceful solution would be the establishment of a better governance network where all stakeholders are connected and involved.

5.3.5 SOUTH AFRICA

5.3.5.1 Rights and recognition of indigenous people

The following section is based on data sourced from the 'South Africa' page on the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) website. South Africa has known two important waves of reversing injustices of the past. Under colonial rule, especially between 1960s and 1983, a large sum of land was taken from indigenous and local people, but during the rise of democracy in 1994, land reform programs were set in motion, holding three main pillars: land redistribution, land tenure and land restitution. However, this was mainly done in areas not considered relevant for conservation by the state. In the remaining areas, PAs were maintained, but a co-management framework was developed to integrate local communities into conservation schemes. This co-management framework entails power-sharing in decision-making, action and communication (Moyo, 2023). The second wave occurred a few decades after that. Previously, the racially-determined apartheid in South Africa caused a social division between 'white' and 'colored' people, ignoring any further social division between tribes and groups among them. In the new regime, from 2013 onwards, the South African government has allowed the right to self-identify and introduced a revision to re-open land claims taken lands before 1913. New claims however, remained unaddressed. After the adoption of UNDRIP in South Africa's legislative system in 2016, a new legal act in 2019 replaced the act of 2003 that excluded most indigenous communities, yet others are still not formally recognized.

5.3.5.2 Maloti-Drakensberg Park

Maloti-Drakensberg serves as a clear example of the forceful displacement during the colonial regime in South Africa, as well as the lack of effective co-management and participation with local communities. According to Moyo (2023), the native inhabitants of the Maloti-Drakensberg are the San people, but the contemporary management of the area is under the authority of Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZN-Wildlife). Legally, they are required to carry out a co-management plan, which entails benefits for local communities, access and usage of resources and the employment of local communities in business

opportunities. However, in practice, their management plan strategies solely focus on conservation and ecotourism management (Moyo, 2023).

5.3.5.3 *iSimangaliso Wetlands Park*

The iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) in KwaZulu-Natal, on the other hand, portrays a rather optimistic case, more aligned with the legal aims to create fair and effective co-management structures in South Africa's protected areas. Their history does not show many differences with Maloti-Drakensberg, marked by forced removals and conflicts between management and local communities. However, Leonard and Duma (2024) explain that between 1998 and 2013, most land claims were settled and access rights were restored. Conservation policies and new management plans were developed in agreement with a range of local communities and the responsibility to protect and conserve among local people was tentatively restored. However, when iSimangaliso entered the stakeholder network of the PA, restrictions and prosecutions became more strict again, resulting in more conflict and legal activities (Leonard and Duma, 2024). At the moment, the co-management system of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park is unstable and at risk, in need of rebuilding trust and collaborations between stakeholders.

6. Discussion

When comparing the results of each case study, as presented in table 2, it becomes clear that each five nations have completely different profiles in regards to economic, political and social development, as well as in their strategies for the governance of PAs and indigenous peoples. Rwanda has rapidly developed and in many forms decolonized, especially since the early 2000's, even after facing a catastrophic genocide in 1994, there is no recognition of indigenous peoples. This governance is justified by the aim to abandon all forms of ethnic profiling, but is leaving no space for the inclusion and development of the Twa people. Kenya has similarly faced great growth in its development and decolonization, but the effects on the recognition and fair governance of local and indigenous groups is only picking up in the last decade. South Africa however, presents a contradictive case; their governance and politics have increasingly shown unstable and ineffective, even though their economy and quality of life has remained stable. Concurrently, multiple governmental attempts are made to decolonize and empower indigenous and local communities. However, up to today, some indigenous groups are completely ignored in these attempts, such as the San people. Lastly, DRC and Tanzania show similarities, Tanzania being in a better developed and stable state however. Both nations have very little recognition for indigenous peoples. Where Tanzania has a past of inclusion and empowerment of indigenous groups, contemporary PA management is discriminative and marginalizing many local groups. Similarly, DRC does accept forest people to coexist within their PAs, but completely ignores the needs and livelihoods of other local/indigenous communities.

Kisingo et al. (2016) identify an increasing International understanding and attention for the role PA management can play in community development, alongside conservation efforts. However, with most PA governance power being with the government of the countries the PAs are in, national law and structures determine the recognition of local communities and their rights. Where PAs are managed in a wider governance system, other stakeholders try to interact with and influence state actors to strive for more co-management systems with true participation by local communities (Kisingo et al., 2016). Besides UNDRIP, being a global attempt to recognize and give rights to indigenous peoples, UNESCO has made multiple attempts to decrease their level of neocolonial interference, as well as to address socio-economic development needs simultaneously with their conservation efforts. One example is UNESCO's "Man and the Biosphere" program in 1968. This program provides a

scientific foundation to develop and innovate sustainable livelihoods worldwide, whilst conserving the nature it coexists with (UNESCO, 2024). Hence, this program attempts to provide missing data, knowledge and skills in order to balance the enhancement of local livelihoods and the safeguarding of natural resources. As another example, since the last decades, UNESCO has collaborative and participative projects in place, such as the International Centre for Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites (UNESCP-WHIPIC, n.d.), to ensure inclusive heritage and “right” representation and valuation of their sites. These and similar examples of programs and initiatives indicate the role UNESCO and the UN as a whole attempts to play in the inclusion of indigenous peoples in PAs worldwide. However, as Collins (2016) explained, neocolonialism is characterized by international involvement in economics, governance and social structures, where foreign (mainly Western) actors attempt to influence local realities to fit European norms and practices. Such interferences are essentially in the way of true (self-)decolonization and therefore we should question if it is our role as foreign actors at all, to pressure and influence local social and legal structures, in an attempt to enhance the position and rights of local communities.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Research conclusions

7.1.1 Indigenous rights in the historical context of each nation

Comparing these five nations shows that development in politics, economy and quality of life are poor predictors of the level of recognition of indigenous peoples and their rights. There seems to be a trend on the African continent where, even when recognizing UNDRIP, there is a lack of recognition of the existence of indigenous groups and peoples in their nations. In regards to decolonization patterns, Kenya, Rwanda and South Africa portray the greatest development. However, in Rwanda, there is no positive correlation with the recognition and fair treatment of indigenous peoples, which could possibly be explained by its unique situation and aftermath of the 1994 genocide. Kenya and South Africa do portray clear signs of recognition and enhanced treatment of indigenous peoples, but this study is not conclusive about the causality and extent of this relationship. Therefore, to answer the first research question, namely *“How does the historical contexts of African nations affect the roles and rights of Indigenous People in the management of natural and mixed World Heritage sites?”*, this research shows that there is a possible positive correlation between the roles and rights of indigenous groups and the overall development after colonial regimes. Countries with low levels of development and decolonization portray low levels of legal and social recognition of indigenous peoples. However, further research is recommended to confirm these conclusions by including more case studies and a deeper analysis of colonial history and regime, as well as the political, economic and social development of the case study nations.

7.1.2 Foreign responsibilities to include/recognize indigenous peoples

Moving on to the second research question of this research, namely *“What responsibilities towards the inclusion/recognition of local custodians in the management of PAs should the processes of foreign (nature) conservation organisations, like UNESCO, embody?”*, the answer is less straightforward. At first, the theory of neocolonialism and the need for decolonization of the African nations explains that foreign aid and involvement is in most cases in the way of true independence and development. Therefore, it is first and foremost important for foreign conservation organisations to respect national laws, structures and governance, even when they do not align with the norms and values of the Western world. That does mean that the core importance when answering this question is that such organizations do not hold a role in changing the status and rights of indigenous peoples. The

Rift valley case study gives an example of how lack of foreign involvement empowered local communities to fight for their own rights and therefore enhances the process of self-decolonization. If UNESCO and IUCN, in their assessment of the site would have bypassed the social and governance structures provided to them in the nomination files, the Endorois people might have been provided with more rights on the site, but true national development towards recognition of local peoples and minority groups would not have been triggered by the legal actions taken by the Endorois. Therefore, I would like to conclude that, no matter how much we feel a need to make up for colonial influences, or “give a voice” to marginalized groups in foreign countries, it is not and cannot be “our” role as foreign institutions and organisations to liberate, develop or decolonize African nations.

7.2 *Study limitations and future research*

This study was limited by two main components, namely access to data and time. For the sake of the research topic, ideally data from the time of independence of each nation would be included, instead of only from the last 50 years, but this data wasn’t readily available. Future research would be encouraged to look deeper into the actual causality of national development trends due to colonial heritages. In regards to time and timing, the research could have been carried out more in-depth to be able to conclude with more certainty. In the final stages of this research practice, it was intended to conduct interviews with national ministers, managers of sites and fellow researchers to affirm findings. However, due to the timing of the intended interviews (December 2024 and January 2025), as well as the limited time to build a network, I have not managed to schedule and conduct interviews with relevant respondents. For the affirmation of the conclusions of this research, as well as future follow-up research, this would be a valuable step to execute. Lastly, the inclusion of current events and conflicts have barely been taken into account in this research. From the start of 2023 onwards, many conflicts in Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa and DRC have affected the statuses and treatment of local communities. However, to minimize the risk of false representation or interpretation of these events, they were not taken into account in this research.

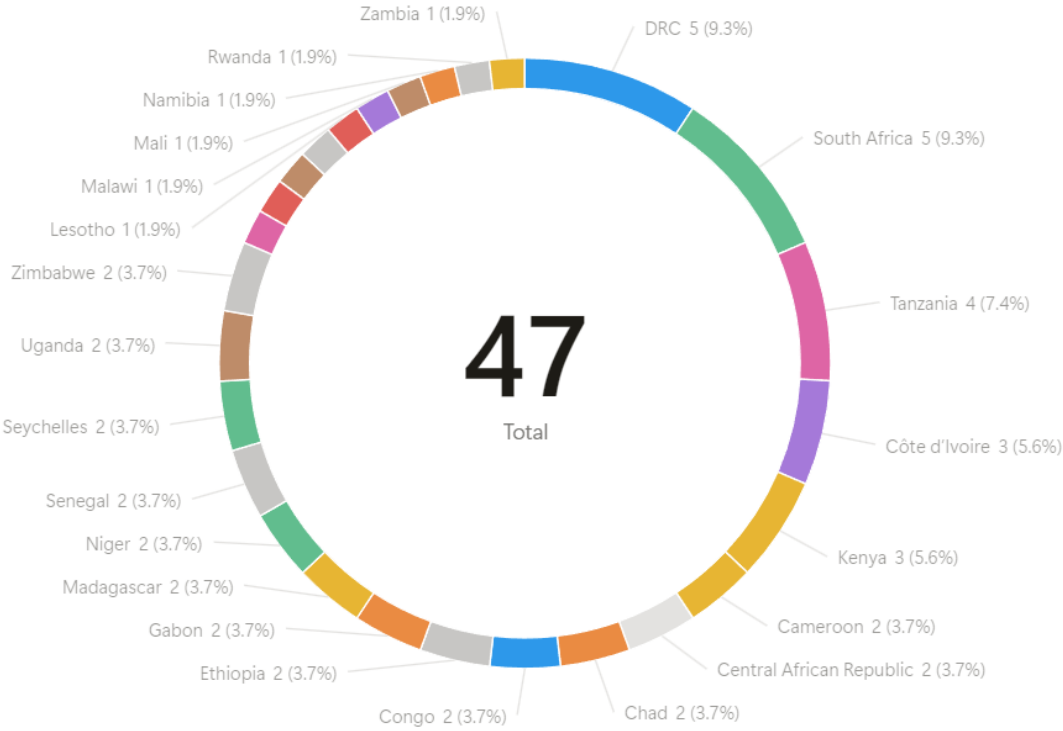
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9. Appendices

Appendix 1 - The distribution of natural and mixed WH sites in the Africa region
Source: Sacred World Heritage project database.



Appendix 2 - The years of listing of natural and mixed WH sites in the Africa region, from 1978 up to 2024
Source: Sacred World Heritage project database.

