Transforming Parks and Protected Areas

Policy and governance in a changing world

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Chapter 11

Political ecology perspectives on ecotourism to parks and protected areas

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In many countries, parks and protected areas have 'become the cornerstone of tourism and recreation' (Task Force on Economic Benefits of Protected Areas of the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) of IUCN, 1998: ix), and are a key attraction for ecotourists (Ceballos-Lasurain, 1996; Weaver, 1998; Honey, 1999). While the IUCN argues that 'the link between protected areas and tourism is as old as the history of protected areas' (Eagles *et al.*, 2002: xv), the importance of this relationship has undoubtedly grown with continued growth in tourism, and, more specifically, in ecotourism. Tourism is often described as the world's largest industry and, while a small component of this overall industry, ecotourism is believed to be one of the fastest growing sub-sectors (Weaver, 1999; The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), 2005).[1]

Definitions of ecotourism are many, and have proliferated since the term was popularized in the 1980s. In an often cited IUCN publication, ecotourism is defined as:

> environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.
> (Ceballos-Lasurain, 1996: 20)

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people' (TIES, n.d.: ¶ 1). These two definitions reflect two components of ecotourism, with the former emphasizing the purpose of ecotourism and the latter emphasizing its impacts. Ecotourists are portrayed as seeking more than just leisure experiences, while the impacts of ecotourism are portrayed as beneficial to both local people and the environment. Both types of definitions reflect attempts to distinguish ecotourism and ecotourists from traditional forms of tourism and tourists. Ecotourism is part of 'The New Moral Tourism' that arose from 'angst-ridden discussion(s)' (Butcher, 2003: 6) about tourism and its negative impacts on host communities and environments, and the accompanying 'denigration of mass tourism' (Butcher, 2003: 7). While we recognize that tourism to parks and protected areas was taking place long before the term ecotourism was coined, and that ecotourism does not necessarily require the existence of protected areas,[2] in this chapter we are concerned with tourism to parks and protected areas that is generally conceived of as, or considered to be, ecotourism.

The literature on ecotourism to parks and protected areas is dominated by impact studies of particular cases which, in general, have shown the results of ecotourism in practice to be disappointing, with negative consequences resulting for the environment and local people (Ziffer, 1989; Cater, 1994; Bookbinder *et al.*, 1998; Honey, 1999; Farrell and Marion, 2001). Thus, the focus of much work is on 'getting ecotourism right' and case studies are often assessed against existing best practice frameworks (e.g. Ross and Wall, 1999; Scheyvens, 1999; McDonald and Wearing, 2003). While these studies have undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of ecotourism, many lack wider theoretical frameworks that might help position ecotourism as a phenomenon both reflecting and reinforcing human–environment relations and tied to larger economic, political, and social processes. In this chapter, we address this gap in the literature by examining ecotourism to parks and protected areas through the lens of political ecology. Like West *et al.* (2003), we believe that without an improved theoretical understanding of ecotourism, case study research will keep rediscovering the disappointments of ecotourism in practice.[3]

In the first part of this chapter, we provide a brief overview of political ecology, focusing on the two dominant threads of research: a structural (neo-Marxist) concern with material practice and a poststructural concern with discourse. Both threads are relevant to the study of ecotourism to parks and protected areas. We also review some of the relevant research by political ecologists on parks and protected areas, ecotourism, and tourism. In the second part of the chapter, we consider three themes of interest to political ecologists – the social construction of nature, conservation and development narratives, and alternative consumption – and what researchers concerned with these contribute to our understanding of ecotourism to parks and protected areas. In the concluding section, we outline a political ecology of ecotourism to parks and protected areas, and suggest ways in which this can enhance studies of this growing phenomenon.

Political ecology

While there is no single definition of political ecology, there is general agreement that it is an approach to understanding environmental issues, conflicts, and problems. According to Watts (2000: 257), political ecology 'seeks to understand the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of what one might call the forms of access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods'. Wilshusen (2003: 41) defines it as an 'overarching frame of inquiry for exploring the politics of natural resource access and use at multiple levels over time'. For Bryant (1998: 79), 'political ecology examines the political dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment in the third world'. This last definition, by referencing both material and discursive struggles, highlights two branches of political ecology: the structural, which focuses on the interactions of 'ecology and a broadly defined political economy' (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 17), and the poststructural, which focuses on the control over discourse, knowledge, and ideas (Blaikie, 1999; Watts, 2000).

The structural approach to political ecology emerged in the late 1970s and combined 'the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself' (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 17). Political ecology critiqued its precursor, cultural ecology, as insufficiently attentive to the broader political and economic forces impacting on local human–environment interactions. In doing so, it was influenced by the growth of neo-Marxism in the social sciences, which pointed to the role of the global capitalist system, and its attendant class relations and modes of production, in shaping local environmental conflicts. Thus, political ecology saw local communities as characterized by 'the presence of markets, deep social inequalities, enduring conflict, and forms of cultural disintegration associated with their integration into a modern world system'

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(Watts, 2000: 261). While political ecology differentiated itself from cultural ecology by bringing 'into the analysis social relations that are not necessarily proximal to the ecological symptoms' (Paulson *et al.*, 2003: 206), it retained the focus on in-depth, local environmental histories (Walker, 2005). Thus, structural political ecology situated environmental change and resource conflicts in political and economic contexts with multi-scalar dimensions, ranging from the local to the global, and emphasized the historical processes influencing environmental change.

The second phase of political ecology began in the 1980s, when authors began to question the structural determinism of neo-Marxist analyses (in which local people were largely cast as victims), the vague specification of politics, and the assumptions made about ecological reality. Using diverse theoretical constructs, researchers have focused on the various actors involved in environmental conflicts and the power relations between them (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). The most prominent theoretical influence in this phase has come in the form of poststructuralism and discourse theory (Escobar, 1994, 1996; Peet and Watts, 1996). Adger *et al.* (2001: 683) 'broadly define discourse as a shared meaning of a phenomenon', while Peet and Watts (1993: 228) suggest that discourse 'is a particular area of language use related to a certain set of institutions and expressing a particular standpoint'. Poststructuralists argue for the importance of discourse as more than a theoretical concern; Escobar (1996), for example, argues that understandings of sustainable development, transmitted through discourse, shape power relations by legitimizing some approaches to economy and environment and not others. Discourses are, therefore, reflections of power relations; those with power assert their discourses, thereby determining what will count as truth and knowledge for all of society.

Thus, poststructural political ecology has been concerned with plurality in knowledge, including ecological knowledge (Watts, 2000). In contrast to the 'taken for granted' ecology of early political ecology, poststructural political ecology requires a phenomenology of nature and recognizes that this is open to debate. Nature, itself, is identified as a social construction, embedded in discourse, and what is silenced in such discourse is as important as what dominates. Scientific experts, sometimes aligned in epistemic communities, are deeply implicated in the production and dissemination of dominant discourses (Fischer, 2000). The task of the discursive political ecologist is thus to map the ways in which knowledge and power disperse through complex networks to produce political-ecological outcomes. One important critique of the poststructural emphasis on discourse is the tendency to see discourses as monolithic, independently reproducing themselves. Both Moore (2000) and Leach and Fairhead (2000) call for greater attention to the agency of individuals as conscious participators in the uptake, transformation, and dissemination of environment and development discourses. The faulty determinism of structural political ecology should not be replaced with equally faulty discursive determinism, a point that we return to in the final section of this chapter.

A few caveats regarding the scope of this chapter: first, we focus on ecotourism to parks and protected areas in 'Third World' or 'developing' countries. One feature of political ecology has been an overriding emphasis on the Third World and marginalized groups, and a related concern for social justice. While there are convincing arguments for extending political ecology to the analysis of First World problems (McCarthy, 2002; Robbins, 2002), existing research on parks and protected areas and ecotourism has been undertaken largely in a Third World context, and our chapter reflects this focus. Second, we engage with both structural and poststructural approaches to political ecology when examining ecotourism to parks and protected areas, as discursive and material practice are coupled, often tightly. Finally, as Blaikie (1999) observes, the relative newness of political ecology means that reviewing past research often involves an *ex-post* re-labelling of work that initially did not self-identify as political ecology. While the majority of authors referenced in this chapter do identify their work as political ecology, we engage in some *ex-post* re-labelling

where necessary. Regardless, some of the reviewed literature would not be labelled as political ecology (especially that cited in our section on alternative consumption). However, political ecology has typically drawn on various theories, fields, and disciplines (Neumann, 2005) and our chapter is in keeping with this tradition.

Political ecology perspectives on protected areas and ecotourism

Political ecologists have devoted some energy to the study of protected areas, which is unsurprising given political ecology's overall interest in forms of access to, and control over, resources; as spatially defined conservation units, parks and protected areas regulate resource use through controlling (and eliminating certain forms of) access. 'Political ecologists reveal how these spaces of conservation become arenas of conflict that result in distinctive patterns of resource management' (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003: 5). Many studies focus on how parks limit activities of local people, and the resulting conflicts that ensue (e.g. Neumann, 1998; Sundberg, 2003; Nygren, 2004). However, few political ecologists have engaged in critiques of tourism,[4] ecotourism in general, or ecotourism to parks and protected areas more specifically.

Some political ecologists studying protected areas mention tourism or ecotourism as an activity when describing their case studies, but do not include it in their detailed analyses. For example, Brown (1998) examines biodiversity conservation in Royal Bardia National Park, Nepal. She looks at the meaning and use of biodiversity to and by different groups, and at the spatial and physical relations of users to park resources. While she refers to the conflict between local forms of resource use and tourism, her focus is on park management regimes and their impacts on local people. The tourism industry is implicated in some negative impacts, but indirectly through providing incentives for park protection and due to profit leakage. Similarly, a study by Daniels and Bassett (2002) examining conflict over resources in Lake Nakuru National Park, Kenya, 'one of the most visited parks in the country', focuses on conflicts between local people, NGOs, and the State. Few (2002) examines community participation in protected areas planning in Belize, and situates his work in political ecology's interest in power and actors. Ecotourism is identified as a motive for establishing protected areas, and local actors are differentiated according to their interests in ecotourism, but ecotourism itself is not questioned.

Perhaps the most explicit applications of political ecology to ecotourism are by Young (1999) and Belsky (1999, 2000) in their case studies in Baja California, Mexico, and in Gales Point, Belize, respectively. Young (1999) contrasts fishing and ecotourism in Baja California, with regards to the benefits of either activity to local resource users and conflicts over access to resources. She argues that the same local and state structures inhibiting effective fisheries management apply in the case of ecotourism; because local people are at a competitive disadvantage with outside investors and due to intra-community conflicts, local interests in long-term environmental sustainability are curtailed. Young (1999: 610) suggests that political ecology's multi-scalar and contextual approach, and its attention to how 'markets, policies, and political processes shape nature-society relations' makes it a useful framework to apply to her case study. Belsky (1999, 2000) critiques community-based ecotourism in Gales Point, arguing that, rather than empowering local people in their development and encouraging their support for conservation, ecotourism development has been subject to existing politics of class, gender, and patronage that result in the inequitable distribution of the costs and benefits of ecotourism. Central to her analysis is the concept of community, the tendency of outsiders to over-simplify this, and how such simplifications shape 'the design, practice, negotiations, and outcomes of community conservation projects' (Belsky, 2000: 645). For Belsky, political ecology's interest in power relations and in representations of nature and people is critical. While taking different approaches, both Young and Belsky effectively challenge the idea that ecotourism is inherently different from other forms of externally

driven development. In contrast to the authors cited in the preceding paragraph, Young and Belsky focus their analysis on ecotourism rather than on the related protected areas to which ecotourists are drawn.[5]

Some researchers have used political ecology to examine more traditional forms of tourism, and their work highlights how parks and protected areas may be used strategically, even when ecotourism is not the focus of the industry. For example, Stonich (1998, 2003) uses political ecology to examine tourism to the Bay Islands, Honduras. Stonich (1998) focuses on the unequal distribution of the economic and environmental costs and benefits of tourism, concluding that the poorest residents bear the majority of the costs and receive few of the benefits. In addition, their livelihood activities are often blamed for environmental degradation, while the greater impacts by the tourism industry are ignored. In a second publication, Stonich (2003) specifically focuses on the creation of marine protected areas (MPAs). While existing tourism to the Bay Islands is not primarily ecotourism, MPA creation is seen as a way to attract this market segment, protect the beach and ocean resources that traditional tourists enjoy, and extend control by elites over tourism development. Again, Stonich's analysis shows how local people lose access to resources in MPA designation while the tourism industry's negative impacts on the marine environment remain mostly unaddressed. In a second example, Gössling (2003a) applies political ecology to what he calls 'high value conservation tourism' in the Seychelles. The Seychelles protects the highest percentage of its land in protected areas globally, and while tourism to the Seychelles is not necessarily ecotourism, the government of the Seychelles sees a clean, healthy, protected environment as a key competitive advantage when trying to attract high-end tourists. Parks and protected areas represent environmental conservation, and are something tourists can identify with to justify 'their stay in such exclusive environments' (Gössling, 2003a: 215). Furthermore, as a visible and measurable indicator of environmental progress, protected areas are one of the few means by which the Seychelles, with its high standards of living, can attract international financial assistance. The irony, of course, is that travel to the Seychelles and the maintenance of high-end tourism facilities lead to over-proportional energy and resource use by tourists and the industry (for an ecological footprint analysis of tourism to the Seychelles, see Gössling *et al.*, 2002).

The studies described above illustrate some of the ways that political ecology can be applied to case studies of parks and protected areas, ecotourism, and tourism more generally, and yet none of them focuses explicitly on the issue of ecotourism *to* parks and protected areas. We find a lack of critical attention to this subject by political ecologists surprising, for several reasons. First, given the increasing popularity of ecotourism and its reliance on parks and protected areas, it is insufficient to treat ecotourism as a mere by-product of park creation. Rather, ecotourism is often implicated in park creation. Thus, political ecology's concern with parks and protected areas should extend to ecotourism. Second, parks and protected areas and ecotourism are linked to capitalism; the parks movement in the US has been characterized as a romantic reaction against the frontier mentality associated with capitalist expansion in the mid- to late nineteenth century (McCormick, 1989; Cronon, 1995). Ecotourism, a more recent phenomenon, has been tied to late-stage (post-Fordist) capitalism and the increased interest in niche opportunities by sophisticated and demanding consumers (Mowforth and Munt, 1998). Additionally, the rise of ecotourism reflects green development thinking, where environmental conservation (and more specifically parks and protected areas) is expected to pay for itself (Adams, 1990; McAfee, 1999; and see the Task Force on Economic Benefits of Protected Areas of the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) of IUCN, 1998). Thus, the traditional concerns of political ecologists with capitalism (its impacts on environment and people) are relevant. Finally, while protected areas themselves have been critiqued as reflecting dominant (Western) human–environment relations that separate humans from nature, ecotourism is part of this same process, with ecotourists seeking unspoiled pristine nature for their leisurely consumption (Urry, 1995; Mowforth and Munt,

1998; Ryan *et al.*, 2000; West and Carrier, 2004). Thus, both parks and protected areas and ecotourism are expressions of predominantly Western values that can be analysed with a more discursive approach to political ecology.

In order to move beyond case study analysis, in this chapter we examine the *idea* of ecotourism to parks and protected areas, using a political ecology approach and drawing on both the material and discursive traditions. We specifically focus on three areas of political ecology research: (1) the social construction of nature; (2) conservation and development narratives; and (3) alternative consumption.

The (socially constructed) nature of ecotourism

As illustrated in the definitions cited in the introduction, 'natural' destinations and attractions, pristine areas that show no sign of human activity, are critical to ecotourism. Parks and protected areas are the dominant way of establishing these natural areas as discrete and separate from human activity. Without objecting to nature conservation per se, political ecology helps to question the assumptions underlying particular ideas of 'nature' as they are produced and reinforced by ecotourism to protected areas. Too often, the nature being protected by parks or visited by ecotourists is taken as given. Following a brief review of the 'social construction of nature' arguments typical of the political ecology literature, this section will explore how the application of such arguments might help to develop a more theoretically informed understanding of ecotourism to parks and protected areas.

The 'social construction of nature' is a phrase 'commonly employed to stress the role of representation, discourse and imagery in defining and framing our knowledge of nature and the natural' (Neumann, 2005: 47). This idea has been vehemently challenged by conservation biologists among others (e.g. Soulé and Lease, 1995; Gandy, 1996), who are concerned that if nature is merely a social construction (i.e. a product of culture and language), rather than an independent entity with its own agency, then the ability to advocate for environmental protection is undermined (Eden, 2001). However, these challenges often misconstrue and simplify what is a complex, nuanced argument (Neumann, 2005). Social constructionism encompasses a range of philosophical positions with differing ontological and epistemological commitments regarding what constitutes nature and the means by which we can know it.[6] Moreover, as Bryant (1998) and Forsyth (2003) both emphasize, the aim of social constructivist arguments in political ecology is rarely to deny the existence of nature (or environmental problems, or biophysical reality), but rather to demonstrate that how nature is identified and depicted is a highly politicized process.

Engagements with social constructionism within the political ecology literature cover a range of positions, which Robbins (2004) organizes into two groups – the 'hard' or 'radical' constructivists and the 'soft' constructivists. Some political ecologists tend toward an ontologically idealist (i.e. radical or hard) position that sees 'language not as a reflection of "reality" but as constitutive of it' (Escobar, 1996: 46). Associated with the linguistic turn in the social sciences, this version of constructionism traces back to Foucault and post-structuralism more generally (Demeritt, 2002). Willems-Braun (1997), for example, takes this position in his study of how nature has been produced and enacted in both colonial and postcolonial British Columbia, through the discourses of colonial surveyors, contemporary forestry companies, and environmentalists. He argues that nature is never *mis*represented, as it can only ever be present *through* representation. Willems-Braun (1997: 5) is thus not interested as much in ideas *about* nature, so much as he seeks to document 'the *emergence* of "nature" as a discrete and separate object of aesthetic reflection, scientific inquiry, and economic and political calculation at particular sites and specific historical moments'.

While hard constructionists exist, most political ecologists invoke a softer form of constructionism (Robbins, 2004: 114) in which language is not constitutive of nature, but the 'subjective conceptual system' through which our knowledge of the objective world of

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nature is filtered. Much of the political ecology literature adopts a critical realist position (Forsyth, 2003; Neumann, 2005), rejecting more extreme constructionist approaches while still 'sharing post-structuralist concerns of the importance of discourse, representation, and imagery in structuring knowledge of the world' (Neumann, 2005: 47). Constructions are not just discourse, as they have consequences for political practices with associated material outcomes (such as the establishment of a national park). 'The imagined forest [or "nature"] becomes the real one, and vice versa, through the enforcement of such constructs by powerful people over time. In this way, the line between objects and ideas is blurred' (Robbins, 2004: 110). Softer constructionists thus call for greater attention to the agency of individuals as conscious participators in the uptake, transformation, and dissemination of ideas and discourses about nature (e.g. Leach and Fairhead, 2000).

Cronon's (1995) treatise on 'the trouble with wilderness', which is perhaps the best-known argument regarding the social construction of nature, has important implications for both historical and contemporary understandings of parks (and tourism to them). Drawing on historical evidence, he argues that wilderness is not a natural state, but a time/place/culture-specific idea; it is a product of the late nineteenth-century United States. Cronon traces the growth of the wilderness concept in American culture, from a wasted and hostile wilderness awaiting the productivity of human (European) civilization, to a threatened wilderness in need of saving from civilization gone too far. The early national parks were introduced to protect this new idea of a 'threatened wilderness', serving several critical social functions in the process. First, they were expressions of social class. 'Ever since the nineteenth century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folk' (Cronon, 1995: 79). Second, they were spaces of leisure and consumption (versus production); wilderness was to be protected, not used (Cronon, 1995). Neumann (1998) similarly argues that wilderness represents a largely visual notion of nature, an Anglo-American aesthetic reinforced through 'centuries of painting, poetry, literature, and landscape design [and more recently, tourist brochures]' (Neumann, 1998: 10). The split between nature/culture, wilderness/civilization, and consumption/production dictates that the only acceptable role for humans in wilderness is as observer (Neumann, 1998). The upper class, aesthetic consumption of nature through ecotourism to parks is further discussed in the section on alternative consumption. The third social function performed by the first national parks was the exclusion of a whole group of people, the Native Americans, in order to create the people-free wilderness that parks were supposed to contain. The persecution and displacement of native peoples that occurred in the early history of the United States, generally as well as specifically in relation to the establishment of national parks as wilderness areas, is well documented (Spence, 1999; Burnham, 2000). As Spence (1999: 4) notes, 'uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved'. Since Yellowstone was officially established as the first American national park in 1872 (Cronon, 1995), US parks, as symbols of human-free wilderness, have served as an international model for protected areas that displace and exclude local people (Guha, 1989; Neumann, 1998; Spence, 1999).[7] The power of this socially constructed idea of people-free wilderness is related to its incorporation into a dominant conservation narrative, as discussed in the next section. Nature and wilderness are not just ideas, they are policy prescriptions for protected areas that dictate 'the exclusion of people as residents, the prevention of consumptive use and minimization of other forms of human impact' (Adams and Hulme, 2001: 10).

The numerous, widespread detrimental effects for local people caused by the imposition of parks are well documented (e.g. West and Brechin, 1991; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997). Ecotourism, in contrast, is often presented as an inclusive alternative that engages local people, providing them with benefits rather than restricting their livelihoods (e.g. Honey, 1999). However, even those forms of ecotourism that champion the rights and well-being of local people often seek to engage local people in the production and defence of a specific, Western view of nature, a view that has previously been used to justify their exclusion from

traditionally inhabited land and that runs counter to their own worldview (Akama, 1996). Ecotourism to parks might provide some support for nearby residents, but it also continues to support a particular version of nature that tends to be divorced from local environmental concerns in developing countries (Guha, 1989). Ecotourism might be no more than eco-imperialism, demanding that host destinations supply and comply with a Western construction of people-free nature (Mowforth and Munt, 1998).

In cases where ecotourism does include local people in nature, it often invokes the image of the noble savage, tribal people living traditional lifestyles in harmony with their environment (Mowforth and Munt, 1998). Just as a socially constructed idea of nature underwrites an exclusionary model of protected areas, so too does a socially constructed idea of 'traditional' or 'indigenous' people delimit the manner in which local people might be readmitted to the nature promoted by ecotourism.[8] Urry (1995) discusses the idea of social pollution to refer to the presence of social groups that interfere with tourists' expectations of place; expectations that are constantly shifting. In Australia, for example, tourists have been 'increasingly finding that Aboriginal culture and practices are no longer "polluting" but are part (or even the most important part) of the exotic attractions of Australia' (Urry, 1995: 189). Mowforth and Munt (1998: 274) refer to this as zooification, a process that 'involves turning tribal peoples into one of the "sights" of a rainforest expedition or a trek'. While in some cases indigenous groups may cooperate with such constructions by 'staging authenticity' (Mowforth and Munt, 1998), in other cases worlds (or natures) may collide, as they do when ecotourists to the Arctic witness a local whale hunt (Hinch, 1998). In their argument for a renewed theoretical critique of ecotourism, West and Carrier (2004) suggest that the interaction of socially constructed ideas of nature and neoliberalism produce a set of common pressures, which they find in ecotourism to parks in Jamaica and Papua New Guinea. They argue that this interaction has a 'tendency to lead not to the preservation of valued ecosystems but to the creation of landscapes that conform to important Western idealizations of nature through a market-oriented nature politics' (West and Carrier, 2004: 485; see also Vivanco, 2001). By calling for analyses of ecotourism that account for both discourse and political economy, West and Carrier (2004) are inadvertently advocating a political ecology of ecotourism.

While some analysts (and even some ecotourists) might be aware of this critique of the nature underlying ecotourism, this 'awareness comes in spite of, rather than because of, the common image and presentation of ecotourism' (Carrier and Macleod, 2005: 329). The construction of nature as a pristine, people-free landscape (except for a few tourists), continues to be reproduced by travel brochures and advertisements, fuelling the geographical imagination of ecotourists (Norton, 1996; Mowforth and Munt, 1998). As Gössling (2003b) points out, ecotourism is both a result of, and reinforces, dominant Western visions of human–environment relations. However, it is important to note that despite the dominance of a particular Western construction of nature in international conservation (including discourses of protected areas and ecotourism), this is not the only model of nature in circulation, nor are its effects ever pre-determined (Olwig, 2004; West and Carrier, 2004). There are some examples of ecotourism ventures in Latin America where local values play an important role (Wesche, 1996; Stronza, 2001). As Vivanco (2001) asserts, based on research in Costa Rica, ecotourism should be analysed as an arena for the contestation of different views and values regarding nature, rather than the enforcement of one dominant view. Moreover, dominant social constructs of nature or indigenous can sometimes prove strategically useful to less powerful groups, who might consciously deploy them to strengthen their claims to resources (Brosius, 1997; Sundberg, 2003; cf. Li, 1996, on 'community'). A political ecology of ecotourism must document the evolution of different social constructions of nature, indigenous, and related concepts, as well as their circulation, contestation, strategic deployment by both more and less powerful groups, and material consequences for the people and landscapes associated with ecotourism to protected areas.

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Talking about ecotourism: conservation and development narratives

One of the dominant themes in poststructural political ecology has been the concept of narratives. A narrative can be defined as a story with a 'beginning, middle, and end (or premises and conclusions, when cast in the form of an argument) and revolves around a sequence of events or positions in which something happens or from which something follows' (Roe, 1991: 288). Narratives justify and inform action to avert disaster or achieve gains. In his original argument that focused on development narratives, Roe (1991) suggested that narratives are often necessary, as they allow for decision-making in the face of uncertainty. The problem arises when narratives prove incorrect; embedded in institutions and with explanatory and descriptive power, they are difficult to displace. Specific examples of narratives failing to play out on the ground, even when numerous, are insufficient to displace a dominant narrative (Roe, 1991). This can only happen when a counter-narrative that tells a 'better story' develops, and Adams and Hulme (2001: 10) argue that counter-narratives must be as 'parsimonious, plausible and comprehensive' as the original.

Roe's (1991) concept of narrative has been applied by political ecologists (and others) to environmental policy and its impacts on local people. One of the most influential studies is by Fairhead and Leach (1995, 1996), who challenge narratives of desertification in West Africa that link deforestation with increasing human populations. Using aerial photos, historical archives, and ethnographic interviews with local inhabitants, the authors demonstrate how the agro-ecological practices of local people have actually generated forest islands around their settlements, in a landscape otherwise dominated by savanna. And yet the State and NGOs, engaged as they are in the narrative of deforestation, intervene to change these same agro-ecological practices (Fairhead and Leach, 1995, 1996). Thus, narratives are not just stories; they have material consequences.

Forsyth (2003) reviews several general environmental narratives (using the term orthodoxy), and works of political ecologists that challenge them. These include narratives of desertification, tropical deforestation, shifting cultivation, rangeland degradation, agricultural intensification, watershed degradation and water resources, and Himalayan environmental degradation. Forsyth's list reflects a traditional concern of political ecologists with marginalized people and their use of natural resources in pursuing their livelihoods. However, political ecologists have also turned their attention to narratives related to conservation of natural resources through parks and protected areas (e.g. Neumann, 1996, 1998). For example, Campbell (2002b) has described a traditional wildlife conservation narrative as follows. The 'problem' or 'crisis' is identified as local people who harvest wildlife and/or threaten it indirectly through competition for wildlife habitat needed to support increasing human populations. Unless human activity is checked, wildlife extinctions are inevitable. The 'solution' is to remove people from spaces in order to provide wildlife with a place where it is not subject to exploitation or competition. Protection is enforced by the State, and if local people do not respect the conditions of their removal, and return to hunt or harvest, they become 'poachers' and 'encroachers'. In doing so, they reconfirm original beliefs about the crisis and, as they are breaking the law, the solution becomes more and better enforcement (Campbell, 2002b: 30). Adams and Hulme (2001) describe how this traditional conservation narrative (labelled the fines and fences approach, coercive conservation, or fortress conservation) developed in Africa, linking it to a variety of forces, including the early imaginings of expatriate colonial men about what 'wild' Africa should be. Early parks and protected areas on the continent allowed for hunting by expatriates and foreign visitors, for whom the activity was characterized as noble and character building, while hunting by local people was characterized as barbaric (MacKenzie, 1988; McCormick, 1989; Neumann, 1996). Thus, the social construction of nature and of indigenousness, as discussed in the previous section, is implicated in the formation of the traditional narrative.

Parks and protected areas have been criticized over the years on a number of practical and philosophical fronts, including their biological utility, the costs of protection, and justice

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concerns associated with exclusionary protection, and their failure to combine conservation and development (the latter critique reflecting a general interest in the concept of sustainable development) (Western and Wright, 1994; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997). As a result, a conservation counter-narrative has arisen to challenge the dominant narrative. Adams and Hulme (2001: 13) identify this as community-based conservation, with two elements: (1) the imperative to allow local people to participate in management of protected resources, and (2) the linkage of conservation objectives with local development needs. Alternatively, Campbell (2002b) argues that community-based conservation is one component of the counter-narrative, concerned primarily with local participation, while sustainable use is a second component, concerned primarily with providing wildlife and/or biodiversity with economic value so that there are incentives to conserve it. This separation of the components of the counter-narrative allows for sustainable use projects that do not include the participation of local people, and community-based conservation that takes place with very low levels of use.

Campbell (2002b) further divides the sustainable use component of the counter-narrative into consumptive and non-consumptive use. With consumptive use defined as the deliberate removal or killing of an organism (Freese, 1998), ecotourism is categorized by default as non-consumptive.[9] As reflected in the TIES definition cited in the introduction, ecotourism is often associated with local development in a way that mainstream tourism is not, with local people empowered and maintaining control over development and its associated economic benefits (e.g. Whelan, 1991). Due to its status as non-consumptive use and its emphasis on local benefits and involvement, i.e. its ability to mesh with the conservation counter-narrative, ecotourism has become a favoured solution of wildlife conservation experts, and Campbell (2002a) illustrates this with case studies from Costa Rica. She shows how marine turtle conservation experts at three sites in Costa Rica have strategically adopted the counter-narrative of community-based conservation and sustainable use in their promotion of ecotourism. By using the language of the conservation counter-narrative, experts appear to be concerned with local livelihoods as well as conservation. Yet, by promoting ecotourism, they are able to continue to support restrictive parks and protected areas, the tools of the traditional narrative, because parks are key ecotourist attractions. Likewise, experts can support prohibition on more consumptive forms of resource use, as these conflict with use by ecotourists (Campbell, 2002a).

While Roe (1991) suggests that narratives become embedded in institutions, Jeanrenaud (2002) argues against a monolithic conservation movement that promotes a single vision of conservation. In the case of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), she identified four groups operating within the organization in the 1990s: (1) cosmocentrics, focused on ecosystem and biodiversity conservation; (2) anthropocentric neoliberals, who emphasize economic and political processes, especially the role of the market; (3) radical anthropocentrics, focused on livelihood needs and rights of marginalized groups; and (4) anthropocentric elites, who promote a traditional conservation agenda based on anthropocentric and theocentric values (e.g. nation building, especially among elites from developing countries). In a similar way, Nygren (1998) identifies four dominant streams of environmentalism in Costa Rica: (1) environmentalism for profit; (2) environmentalism for nature; (3) environmentalism for people; and (4) alternative environmentalism. While recognizing this diversity, Gray (2003) and Campbell (2002b) argue that part of ecotourism's appeal lies in its ability to serve the needs of such diverse interests. For example, ecotourism is conceived as a way to make conservation pay for itself (environmentalism for profit), provide income for local people to meet development needs (environmentalism for people), and justify the creation of protected areas to serve the tourist industry (environmentalism for nature) (Gray, 2003). More specifically, Campbell (2002b) considers ecotourism to Costa Rica and the way it has influenced traditional political groups and alliances between them. The capital accumulation nexus, social

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reform nexus, and ecodevelopment nexus (first identified by Carriere, 1991) all find something to identify with in ecotourism (Campbell, 2002b). In establishing ecotourism as a component of a narrative, and the broad appeal it has to diverse interest groups, political ecology helps us to understand why ecotourism continues to be promoted in spite of failures to live up to expectations in practice.

Ecotourism as alternative consumption

Recently, political ecologists have turned their attention to the issue of 'alternative consumption'. Alternative consumption is 'the "new" activism', making consumption an important site for moral expression (Bryant and Goodman, 2004: 344). With the expansion of civil society into consumption (Butcher, 2003), and the continued expansion of the neoliberal agenda globally, consumers are depicted as powerful agents of change (West and Carrier, 2004). They use this power to demand fairer trade and more responsible producers and governments; thus, alternative consumption is a site for political voice and mobilization (Miller, 1995). With emphasis on the individual, consumers become 'the frontline' (Bryant and Goodman 2004: 344) and consumption the locus for resisting the exploitive elements of capitalism.

Focused as it is on consumers, alternative consumption is one means of bringing tourists into the analysis of ecotourism to parks and protected areas. As noted earlier, ecotourism and ecotourists have largely been overlooked by political ecologists. Furthermore, Bryant and Goodman (2004) argue that an analysis of consumption allows us to break free from the North/South dichotomies that have plagued political ecology. While political ecologists have traditionally been concerned with marginalized communities in the South, 'there is surprising little effort . . . devoted to assessing how social processes integral to the North may affect Southern political ecologies through a variety of geographical pathways' (Bryant and Goodman, 2004: 347).

Bryant and Goodman (2004) identify two commodity cultures within alternative consumption. The first is a conservation-seeking culture concerned for the environment and with an interest in preserving it. This translates into buying products such as organic food and green cleaning products. The second is a solidarity-seeking culture focused on social justice through fairer trade and labour practices. Concern for peoples (especially workers in the Global South) translates into buying products such as fair trade cocoa or coffee. While Bryant and Goodman (2004) contrast products that appeal to the conservation-seeking versus the solidarity-seeking cultures, ecotourism purportedly combines the two; it is about helping others use nature in a less destructive (and more profitable) way (West and Carrier, 2004), and doing so by expressing consumer preference. In this section, ecotourism, a pre-eminent form of alternative consumption, is analysed from three perspectives: (1) the moralization of consumption; (2) the consumption of aesthetic nature (and community); and (3) consumption and neoliberal capitalism.

As outlined in the introduction, ecotourism is an important component of 'The New Moral Tourism' and appeals to consumers searching for something better than traditional mass tourism (Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Butcher, 2003). Part of the appeal lies in consumer anxieties about environmental damage in First World nations (i.e. the homes of most ecotourists), or 'the projection of guilt from self onto others' (Heyman, 2005: 114). The ecotourism industry extracts profit from this guilt through the use of moral suasion (Heyman, 2005). For example, ecotourists are pitted against mass tourists; the former are altruistic and contributory while the latter are self-interested and damage-causing (Bryant and Goodman, 2004). Ecotourism is better because it is portrayed as non-consumptive (often replacing consumptive uses of wildlife and other resources), having minimal environmental impacts, and supporting local culture and/or being community-friendly (Boo, 1990; Wilson and Tisdell, 2001). Not only is ecotourism better than mass tourism, however, it is a desirable

or positive activity that ecotourists can feel good about. Ecotourism can even be viewed as offering salvation, a way for tourists to help preserve people and places, notably people and places 'over there' (Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Bryant and Goodman, 2004). Putting ecotourism on this pedestal moves it beyond a form of consumption that benefits the consumer (Heyman, 2005) and gives it political and moral power.

While ecotourism has both environmental and socio-economic goals, and alternative consumption has both conservation-seeking and solidarity-seeking components, environmental features arguably dominate in ecotourism[10] and the aesthetics of ecotourism are critical. Given the traditional importance of aesthetics and the tourist 'gaze' to tourism in general (Urry, 1995, 2002; Ryan *et al.*, 2000), this emphasis is hardly surprising. However, given ecotourism's claims about promoting local development, the ecotourism aesthetic warrants further scrutiny. Ecotourism to parks and protected areas is based on, and reinforces, an aesthetic of wilderness (Cronon, 1995) or nature (West and Carrier, 2004), and promotes Edenic myths (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Nelson, 2005) to draw the ecotourist, as discussed in the section on the social construction of nature. Ecotourism destinations must exemplify 'nature', 'exotic', and/or 'simple' (West and Carrier, 2004: 491). For example, Costa Rica, a country highly successful in cultivating an ecotourism image, uses the marketing slogan 'All Natural Ingredients' (www.visitcostarica.com). Communities can be part of the ecotourism aesthetic, provided they remain natural or simple and not overdeveloped. Thus, the imposition of an ecotourism aesthetic on a community can work against the solidarity-seeking aspect of alternative consumption, by promoting a limited and/or static vision of development, one that favours traditional (often subsistence) livelihoods, architecture/infrastructure, and culture in general. Any ecotourism-related infrastructure that is developed (such as canopy walks, hiking trails, or souvenir shops) might have little value to local host communities, and yet might be prioritized over infrastructure improvements that detract from the aesthetic, such as paved roads or concrete buildings. Such restrictions might be at odds with local wants, needs, and aspirations, i.e. local notions of the right to develop (Thrupp, 1990; Urry, 1995; Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Scheyvens, 1999; West and Carrier, 2004). Through the establishment of parks and protected areas and the design of nearby facilities, the ecotourist aesthetic can act much like zoning or other regulatory planning tools do in terms of constraining local development.

The ecotourist aesthetic might also work against the conservation-seeking component of alternative consumption, with environments managed for key species of interest to tourists rather than for overall ecosystem function and health.[11] A case study by West and Carrier (2004) of Montego Bay, Jamaica, illustrates how both the conservation and solidarity-seeking components of alternative consumption may fail to materialize with ecotourism, at a number of levels. First, under a neoliberal agenda where conservation pays for itself, Montego Bay was selected as the site for Jamaica's first marine park, not because it was the most pristine or environmentally valuable location, but because the area had the tourist infrastructure in place to attract, house, and entertain would-be ecotourists, who were seen as critical to the park's success. Second, ecotourist beliefs about what a pristine marine environment should look like influenced park management. While the overall health of the bay depended on less visible elements (bacteria, sea urchins, sediment, and coral growth), managers had to spend time on more marketable features, so that tourists would pay to snorkel and dive there (i.e. so the park could pay for itself). Finally, in spite of the fact that fishing in the park by local people was legal, park managers were under increasing pressure to 'overwrite coastal waters with a new set of ecotourist meanings identifying certain sorts of people, fee-paying ecotourists, as properly in those waters – indeed as necessary to their survival – and Jamaicans in small boats as belonging elsewhere' (West and Carrier, 2004: 488). This example illustrates the way that ecotourism might be different from other alternative consumption products; because ecotourists go directly to the ecotourism product (rather

than purchasing it from a shelf in a supermarket), the conflicts between conservation-seeking and solidarity-seeking components of alternative consumption come to the fore.

Alternative consumption has been critiqued for its acceptance of neoliberal economics and its focus on the individual; individual consumers in the developed North make choices that benefit environments and local producers in the South. With this emphasis on consumers expressing preferences in the market, alternative consumption poses few challenges to the global capitalist system. Rather, it accepts this as given and, by creating new products within it, encourages its continuance and extension (Manokha, 2004; West and Carrier, 2004). Capitalism is made 'nicer' through fairer trade relations and/or environmental practices, rather than questioned or overthrown (Goodman, 2004). Thus, alternative consumption relies on the commodification of nature. In the case of ecotourism, the establishment of parks and protected areas for tourists to visit represents the commodification of these green spaces and particular species within them (Dorsey *et al.*, 2004). McAfee (1999) and Escobar (1996) describe this form of 'nature undisturbed' as postmodern ecological capital, in contrast with modern ecological capital (e.g. forests as lumber). Parks and protected areas become not simply plots of land set aside for conservation purposes that happen to be visited by ecotourists, but places created for and *by* ecotourists (Urry, 1995; West and Carrier, 2004), and that should accommodate the ecotourist gaze (Urry, 1995, 2002; Ryan *et al.*, 2000; West and Carrier, 2004). Sites that are not of interest to the ecotourist, i.e. that are not in demand, might be overlooked. Furthermore, in the ecotourist search for authenticity, ecotourism often brings 'backstage' regions that ecotourists seek out to the 'frontstage' (MacCannell, 1973; Butcher, 2003), making once little-known places a 'must see' for growing numbers of ecotourists. By contributing to the commoditization of places, ecotourism arguably works against itself; by putting previously unknown destinations on the tourism map, it replaces the 'authentic' places that it is trying to preserve with created places (Urry, 1995; Mowforth and Munt, 1998; West and Carrier, 2004).

Political ecology's approach to ecotourism as a form of alternative consumption offers deeper insight into the ecotourist as a consumer, a political actor, and a socio-political identity, rather than a mere bystander in the drama that unfolds when parks and protected areas clash with local peoples' livelihood aspirations in ecotourism destinations. This addresses one of the weaknesses in the existing political ecology literature, where ecotourists are rarely a focus of analysis. Furthermore, by focusing on the consumptive aspects of ecotourism, alternative consumption also connects with political ecology's traditional interests in capitalism. A political ecology approach to ecotourism as a form of alternative consumption should be concerned with 'the distribution of power in consumption' (Heyman, 2005: 128) in order to help (re)focus studies of ecotourism back outward to the important (neoliberal) political and economic context in which it occurs, and where consumer wants are key (West and Carrier, 2004).

Towards a political ecology of ecotourism to parks and protected areas

Our chapter began by identifying two characteristics of the existing literature on ecotourism to parks and protected areas. First, studies of ecotourism are largely case study based and often atheoretical. Many reveal the ways in which the benefits of ecotourism bypass local communities or that ecotourism development negatively impacts the environment, and some use best practice frameworks to suggest ways in which such problems might be overcome. While such studies are useful and provide rich context-specific data, we agree with West *et al.* (2003) that without a larger theory of ecotourism, researchers will keep rediscovering the shortcomings of ecotourism in practice. Second, political ecologists have studied parks and protected areas, tourism, and ecotourism, but there are few studies that focus on ecotourism *to* parks and protected areas. In many cases, ecotourism is part of the context or

background for political ecology's concern with the impacts of (state) resource management interventions on local people. Analysis of ecotourists is almost entirely absent. This might be explained by political ecology's traditional interests in marginalized peoples and the structural constraints (primarily political and economic) on their livelihood options, and state management interventions and alliances with major resource extraction companies (e.g. timber, oil). As an industry often dominated at the local level by small- to medium-sized private businesses, ecotourism and ecotourists might have simply slipped under the radar.

In this chapter, we outline a political ecology of ecotourism to protected areas by drawing on three thematic interests of political ecologists: the social construction of nature, conservation and development narratives, and alternative consumption. These are certainly not the only themes of interest to political ecologists, or the only ones relevant to the issue of ecotourism to parks and protected areas.[12] However, they were selected because of the number of ways in which they work together and can be integrated to provide an enhanced theoretical understanding of ecotourism to parks and protected areas, and it is to their integration that we now turn.

While Campbell (2002a, b) identifies ecotourism as the 'received wisdom' of a conservation counter-narrative that promotes sustainable use and community-based conservation, the widespread and growing popularity of ecotourism suggests that it may be more appropriate to consider a separate narrative *of* ecotourism. The narrative begins with acceptance (or celebration) of a neoliberal economic reality in which nature pays its way in order to survive. Local people are seen as having legitimate developmental needs and therefore they must be given incentives to save nature rather than convert it for other productive activities. Ecotourism, due to its non-consumptive status, is conceived of as a more economically beneficial and sustainable use of nature than traditional activities. Furthermore, local people are able to capture economic benefits due to the small-scale nature of ecotourism and the concerns of ecotourists with supporting local cultures and economies. To attract ecotourists, host countries must develop ecotourism products, and the most easily identified are parks and protected areas that have the added benefit of being able to charge entrance fees. When ecotourists come to these parks, everyone wins: local people provide services to tourists and earn more income than they would via other uses of resources, nature is protected in parks and protection is supported through entrance fees, and ecotourists contribute to causes they believe in while experiencing unique environments and peoples. This ecotourism narrative is a powerful one. Unlike many environmental narratives that are of crisis, the ecotourism narrative is one of salvation; nature and local people are saved through the actions of ecotourists, and parks are the temples to which the morally aware consumers flock to do good. As such, ecotourism is often the starting point of conservation projects, rather than one of many options to consider.[13]

This narrative persists in spite of evidence that ecotourism often fails to meet expectations in practice, and the elements of political ecology (individually, but more powerfully in combination) reviewed in this chapter can help to explain why. First, narratives are always resilient in the face of evidence that they are wrong, and our review of conservation and development narratives suggests that a narrative of ecotourism might be particularly resilient because it meets the needs of a variety of interest groups, regardless of their views on the best way to pursue conservation and development. In this way, the ecotourism narrative might be considered a supra-narrative, under which a variety of conservation and development narratives can peacefully co-exist. Second, the ecotourism narrative is supported by a deeply embedded (Western) social construction of nature that most often depicts nature as something separate from humans and in need of protection from the ravages of capitalist development. Parks and protected areas originated from this view, and, by participating in ecotourism, ecotourists both reflect and reinforce it. Third, ecotourism appeals to conscientious consumers who are interested in alternative options that are both more labour and environmentally sensitive than traditional forms of tourism. Ecotourism provides people

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with the opportunity to assuage their guilt over their resource-consumptive lifestyles by contributing to nature conservation and local development 'over there'. Since ecotourists need consumable products, parks and protected areas are a key ecotourist commodity. However, the dominant social construction of nature remains, and though ecotourists purport to be both solidarity-seeking and conservation-seeking alternative consumers, their vision of nature allows for solidarity with very limited forms of local development. There is an equally strong social construction of indigenous or traditional peoples, and local development needs and wants might conflict with this.

There are several ecological outcomes of ecotourism to parks and protected areas. By far the most widely recognized impacts concern the protection (or removal) of nature from traditional productive activities when it is set aside in parks and protected areas, and this protection occurs with or without ecotourism. Much of the political ecology work on parks and protected areas has focused on the impacts of protection on the livelihoods of local people. However, we argue that there are additional ecological outcomes associated specifically with ecotourism and ecotourists. First, the ecotourist 'gaze' might demand that parks are created in places that have features ecotourists want to see or, as shown in the case of Montego Bay, Jamaica, that have the infrastructure to support the ecotourists required to ensure financial viability (West and Carrier, 2004). Second, the same gaze focuses on the 'frontstage' environment and related infrastructure, e.g. charismatic species and landscapes, and the hiking trails, viewing platforms, and information displays required to enjoy them. Meanwhile, the 'backstage' environment and infrastructure, e.g. water quality, waste treatment and disposal facilities, might be neglected. Third, the ecotourist focus on the parks and protected areas product masks the broader impacts of ecotourism. For example, Carrier and MacLeod (2005) introduce the idea of the 'ecotourist bubble' to describe the limited context within which ecotourism is often viewed and presented. They recount the story of a tourist who had travelled to Antarctica and was careful to note that she had avoided stepping on the fragile plant life, even though a much larger concern might be the carbon dioxide emissions resulting from her air travel. Overall, if the 'nature' being supported by ecotourism is based on the ecotourist gaze and a particular wilderness construction, then the focus is on plant and animal life rather than emissions, resource consumption (e.g. fresh water), or other sorts of impacts.[14] Conservation becomes marine mammal conservation, or sea turtle conservation, or rainforest conservation (i.e. aesthetic conservation (Green, 1990 cited in Urry, 1995)), and concerns for the wider environment are lost.

In developing a political ecology of ecotourism to parks and protected areas, and more specifically a narrative of ecotourism, we are in no way arguing for the end of ecotourism to parks and protected areas. Such a call would be naive and, if heeded, the impacts would be undesirable in many places. We recall at this point one critique of discursive political ecology, i.e. the tendency to see discourses as monolithic and intractable. As Moore (2000: 655) argues: 'Far too often, contemporary analyses eclipse the micro-politics through which global development discourses are refracted, reworked, and sometimes subverted in particular localities ... The specificity of these struggles belies any single totalizing development discourse.' As suggested in our treatment of the social construction of nature, the existence of a dominant social construction does not mean it is the only one, and the effects of a related narrative of ecotourism are not always predetermined. Though far fewer in number than their critical counterparts, there are case studies of ecotourism to parks and protected areas where the narrative (or individual elements of it) plays out and is realized to some extent in practice. Resources can be protected, local people can benefit from ecotourism and agree that it is a superior form of development, local values can be respected, and tourists can experience nature and culture in meaningful ways (e.g. Colvin, 1996; Wesche, 1996; Wunder, 2003; Stronza, 2004). Thus, in particular places and for particular peoples, the results of the narrative can be good. Equally, however, there are ample case

studies in the literature describing when the narrative remains just that: a story with little relation to what happens in practice. The strength of the narrative means that these far more numerous examples are treated as individual exceptions, the problems of which are to be corrected.

Our hope is that in recognizing an ecotourism narrative, the powerful values underlying it, its broad appeal to a variety of interest groups, and its links to neoliberalism, we can, like West *et al.* (2003), find ways to subvert it. Roe (1991) and Adams and Hulme (2001) would suggest that an important step in subversion is the development of a counter-narrative, that is as 'parsimonious, plausible, and comprehensible as the original' (Adams and Hulme, 2001: 10). We suggest that re-writing the ecotourism narrative, for example, in a way that opens it up to alternative constructions of nature and that recognizes and challenges the ecotourism aesthetic, might be as important/effective as trying to manage for impacts on site at individual parks and protected areas. Recognizing the inherent (rather than site-specific) challenges associated with ecotourism might lead, for example, to a different conceptualization of the role of ecotourism in national and international conservation strategies. Rather than trying to achieve environmental and socio-economic objectives via ecotourism at each park, we might instead envision a system of parks where some are sacrificed to ecotourists, some to local people, and some to 'nature'. Ecotourism thus becomes one of many options to engage local support for parks and protected areas, rather than the only one.

As discussed in the section on conservation and development narratives, part of the strength of the ecotourism narrative lies in its broad appeal to a variety of interest groups. However, there are signs that the attraction of the ecotourism narrative is waning for some. For example, Kiss (2004) questions the economic and conservation gains of ecotourism to parks and protected areas and Weaver (2002) argues that 'hard' ecotourism, i.e. ecotourism that meets its goals of protecting the environment, cannot provide sufficient revenue to ensure local support. More generally, Wilshusen *et al.* (2002) outline a resurgent protectionist movement concerned by the poor conservation outcomes associated with efforts to integrate local economic development into parks and protected areas, including efforts made via ecotourism. This movement calls for the return to people-free, strictly protected parks and protected areas (Oates, 1999; Terborgh, 1999), and has shaken the types of alliances supported by ecotourism, detailed by Campbell (2002b) and Gray (2003). Brockington *et al.* (2006) describe a resulting 'unproductive' discomfort between those interested in parks and those interested in peoples, and Redford *et al.* (2006) suggest this discomfort is leading to a 'brittleness' in our conception of parks, one that threatens to undermine their utility for conservation and/or local development. They argue that the dialogue on parks and protected areas needs to be opened up, with a recognition that 'parks' fit into a variety of categories that 'incorporate people and their economic endeavours in different ways' (Redford *et al.*, 2006: 2). Such a dialogue, should it transpire, would also provide the much needed opportunity for reconceptualizing the role of ecotourism to parks and protected areas.

Redford *et al.* (2006) lament that the two sides in the parks-versus-people debate are engaged in a 'dialogue of the deaf', so intent are they in making their points and defending their views. 'Social scientists have set out bold and effective criticisms of the social dimensions (and especially social effects) of park creation, and content with their hostile critique they have not often engaged with the issue of policy reform' (Redford *et al.*, 2006: 1). We reiterate here that failure to get beyond case studies of ecotourism to parks and protected areas to a more theoretically informed understanding of the political, economic, and social context in which ecotourism takes place, will make any attempts to 'do ecotourism better' superficial. The reform called for by Redford *et al.* (2006) will only be meaningful if it recognizes, engages with, and hopefully challenges the ecotourism narrative, and political ecology is one approach that can help to accomplish this.

Notes

1 A recent article in *The New York Times*, for example, identified ecotourism as the 'buzzword of the year' (Higgins, 2006).

2 Wearing and Neil (1999) and Weaver (1998) expand ecotourism to include travel to degraded natural sites, such as participation in an oil spill clean-up.

3 West *et al.* (2003) argue that there is a political economy of ecotourism that can explain, for example, why local people receive few ecotourism benefits. They then look for ways that local people may escape this political economic reality and capitalize on ecotourism opportunities.

4 An edited volume by Gössling (2003c) uses political ecology to examine case studies of tourism to tropical islands, but the extent to which individual chapters integrate political ecology into their analysis varies substantially.

5 Only one of Young's (1999) field sites lies in a protected area, but this biosphere reserve was not 'fully functioning' at the time of her research, and few local people realized it existed. While the issue of 'paper parks' is a compelling one, in this chapter we focus on ecotourism to parks and protected areas that experience some level of administration and enforcement.

6 Several authors have attempted to dissect the social constructionist argument, offering typologies of constructionism generally (Hacking, 1999), and in relation to 'nature' more specifically (Proctor, 1998; Demeritt, 2002).

7 As Schelhas (2001) notes, Native Americans have not been excluded from *all* US parks, and some US park experiences may, indeed, offer valuable lessons in the international context. Likewise, many parks in the US did not uphold the supposed elements of the US park model. However, the focus here is on the power of a discourse that upholds a particular, exclusionary model of a park based on an idea of 'people-free nature'. It is the power of this image, rather than the variation in experience, that is of interest.

8 More generally, Brockington *et al.* (2006) are critical of the overall focus among conservationists on relationships between 'indigenous' people and protected areas, while relatively little attention is given to non-indigenous local people.

9 The term consumption is used differently in different fields. In economic terms, consumption contrasts to production, with the latter referring to the transformation of natural resources into goods. In wildlife conservation, the discussion of sustainable use distinguishes between consumptive and non-consumptive use, with consumption referring to the direct removal of a species or its parts for use and non-consumptive referring to more passive viewing by tourists (some would argue this is an erroneous distinction, see Tremblay, 2001; Meletis and Campbell, 2007). The concept of production is absent in the wildlife conservation literature on sustainable use.

10 While ecotourists are supposed to be interested in local culture, studies of tourist preference show that local cultures often rank considerably lower than environmental features (Jacobson and Robles, 1992; Hvenegaard and Dearden, 1998).

11 Green (1990, cited in Urry, 1995: 186) defines this outcome as aesthetic conservation, i.e. 'to conserve an environment in accordance with pre-given conceptions of beauty and the sublime, conceptions which often depend upon what is being contrasted with the environment in question'.

12 For example, many political ecologists study the network of actors that influence resource management, and that work at various geographic scales. We could have considered the various actors involved in promoting ecotourism and parks and protected areas, incentives provided by donor agencies to national governments to encourage them to pursue these options, the interests of various state agencies and national elites in promoting them, and how local communities may be differentiated according to their interests in, and involvement with, ecotourism (this resembles the type of political economy of ecotourism suggested by West *et al.* (2003).

13 For example, a recent WWF publication on sea turtle conservation advocates tourism as the solution for turtle conservation programmes globally (Troëng and Drews, 2004).

14 Concern with the impacts of ecotourism have led some tourism analysts to question the categorization of ecotourism as more environmentally and socially responsible than mass tourism. Weaver (1991), for example, suggests that conventional mass tourism concentrates impacts and can develop the infrastructure required to deal with 'backstage' environmental impacts. In contrast, ecotourism

disperses impacts, and disperses them into areas that are often environmentally fragile. This dispersal in combination with an ecotourism aesthetic might limit the capacity to deal with environmental impacts.

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