

# Opinion: Southern Africa is seen as a leader in wildlife conservation, but its market-driven approach is deeply flawed

July 9 2024, by Stasja Koot, Bram Büscher and Lerato Thakholi

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Southern Africa's wildlife economy is [often hailed](#) as a successful model. The idea behind this model is that biodiversity and wildlife are

used as the basis of sustainable economic growth, through an increase in wildlife numbers and in a country's revenue.

But how successful has the model actually been in places like Botswana, Namibia and South Africa? We recently edited a [special issue](#) in the scientific journal Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space on the theme of southern African [conservation](#). We are [political ecologists](#) looking into social and historical developments of environmental issues. In [our article introducing](#) the issue we argue that, in fact, the southern African [wildlife](#) economy is socially and environmentally unsustainable.

There are three main reasons for this. First, the model largely depends on [fossil fuels](#). Wildlife estates, where wealthy people live alongside wildlife in gated communities, and luxury tourism consume a lot of energy and other resources. Second, the model's market-driven approach allows [social inequalities](#) to continue. Third, it tends to ignore local realities while advancing global biodiversity conservation goals.

We argue that the sector should instead adopt a ["convivial" conservation](#) approach. This means finding ways for diverse humans and other species to live together rather than being separated into pristine wildlife areas and highly unequal "human" spaces. In this way, conservation can help build a sustainable economy of care rather than an exploitative economy of growth.

## **Brief history of southern African conservation**

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the colonial era, southern Africa was at the forefront of establishing protected areas. Examples include South Africa's [Kruger National Park](#), [Hwange National Park](#) in Zimbabwe and [Etosha National Park](#) in Namibia.

Setting aside land for parks [was motivated](#) by colonists' hunting interests.

Later, worries about declining wildlife numbers (partly as a result of that hunting) and farmland expansion led to the creation of more protected areas.

The 1960s saw an increase in private conservation enterprises such as hunting, wildlife breeding and photographic tourism, especially in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Often this involved evicting people from their land. Later, fences were erected in what came to be termed "[fortress conservation](#)."

This had several negative consequences. Rural populations' diets became less diverse because they could no longer hunt some species. What's more, [coercive, violent management](#) of these areas was common.

Because of this, and global shifts in development thinking in the 1970s and 1980s, community-based conservation [came](#) to be [promoted](#) alongside fortress conservation.

This approach combined conservation with development. Financial benefits through tourism and trophy hunting were supposed to flow to [local communities](#). Despite some successes, it had [mostly disappointing results](#) and its popularity waned.

The late 1990s brought yet another initiative that promised to alleviate poverty and conserve nature: transfrontier conservation or "peace parks."

But a swift [increase of wildlife crime in the region](#) (especially rhino poaching) around 2007 reinvigorated older ideas about fortress conservation. There was also a drive towards "[green militarization](#)": using military methods to pursue conservation.

None of these approaches dealt effectively with environmental, socio-economic and racial injustices.

## The wildlife economy

Over the past decade, the wildlife economy has emerged as a proposed "new" solution to protect biodiversity and grow the economy.

In fact it follows a long history of market-based mechanisms to achieve conservation. One older form is (luxury) nature-based tourism. Newer ways to commodify nature include wildlife estates and timeshare agreements in private reserves.

The current model is based on the idea that privatization and commodification of wildlife is moral, inclusive and environmentally sustainable. But it's not—especially against the background of highly uneven socio-economic and racial inequalities all over southern Africa.

The wildlife economy is unsustainable and strengthens injustices in three ways.

First, it is environmentally unsustainable because of its [dependence on fossil fuels](#). Fossil fuel companies power the flights and other transport that bring people to wildlife spaces.

Second, the wildlife economy is socially unsustainable. Ownership of land and access to natural resources remains [highly unequal along racial lines](#).

These inequalities create what we call a "new green apartheid." For example, some communities of Black people in and near conservation areas [barely have enough water for survival](#). Meanwhile, mostly white tourists and estate inhabitants receive water from boreholes to enjoy wildlife, swimming pools, or even golf courses.

Third, the wildlife [economy](#) approach tends to ignore local realities

while advancing biodiversity conservation goals.

Take the case of cheetah conservation in Namibia. The business model of saving cheetahs in Namibia is spearheaded by conservation NGOs. They are mainly preoccupied with pleasing global audiences and funders while [largely ignoring](#) local livestock farmers' issues with human-wildlife conflict.

In Botswana, environmental policies that receive global approval [contravene local customs of democratic participation](#).

These examples show how local people's livelihoods, land ownership and cultures, but also the climate, tend to fall by the wayside in pursuit of species numbers and landscape restoration.

## **Towards convivial conservation?**

Conservation in southern Africa is ripe for a solution that goes to the roots of the problems. This is the approach taken under [convivial conservation](#), which is a vision, a politics and a set of governance principles for the future of conservation.

Over the last five years, convivial conservation has gained traction in [research, policy and practice](#). Proponents of the model are investigating how to move beyond the old ways of doing things by including different philosophies and value systems, such as the notion of [ubuntu in southern Africa](#). It also investigates conservation possibilities beyond market mechanisms, such as the potential of a [conservation basic income](#).

In sum, convivial conservation focuses on "living with" biodiversity over the long term, instead of exploiting it at the cost of everything else.

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