

An evaluation of the implementation of communal conservancies in Namibia

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The country of Namibia in southwestern Africa has abundant natural resources and a high level of biodiversity of wildlife including elephants, lions, zebras, cheetahs and rhinoceroses. In 1996, due to problems such as high poverty levels, dropping wildlife numbers, and poaching in ivory, horn and other animal products, (Boudreaux & Nelson, 2011), legislation was enacted in hopes of alleviating these problems with an incentive-based approach to wildlife conservation (Naidoo et al., 2016). This legislation enabled the establishment of communal conservancies, unfenced shared lands managed by an elected committee of community members who are given property rights by the government to control, manage and distribute natural resources (Weaver & Petersen, 2008). Activities within the conservancies utilise the natural resources while raising revenues and job opportunities for the community through tourism activities such as trophy hunting, safaris, traditional villages and sale of handicrafts made from local materials. It is widely reported that these conservancies have been successful at both promoting a recovery in wildlife populations and improving the income and standard of living of rural residents (Boudreaux & Nelson, 2011; Hoole & Berkes, 2010).

However, discussions amongst academics from multidisciplinary fields have shed light on some of the detrimental consequences that these communal conservancies have had on its people, its animals, and the delicate ecosystems. Some academics report issues of financial mismanagement (Boudreaux, 2010) and unfair distribution of income (Kahler & Gore, 2015; Mosimane & Silva, 2015), while others focus on problems resulting from the increased animal populations (Hoole, 2008; Khumalo & Yung, 2015) and damage to the ecosystem structure (Lagendijk, Page & Slotow, 2011; Ripple, Newsome & Kerley, 2016). This essay argues that despite the successes of the communal conservancies in Namibia, restructuring of policies and regulations is still required in order to achieve a more sustainable program that minimizes negative impacts to community members and the environment.

While tourism-related activities are generating revenues, issues regarding effective financial management and uneven distribution of benefits seem to be widespread in the conservancies. Mosimane and Silva (2015) conclude that the local governance institutions they investigated lacked plans for proper distribution of benefits, and that the national government is not providing proper monitoring and enforcement of relevant policies. They argue that fair and equitable distribution of benefits is critical to the long-term success of conservancies. Unequal distribution of benefits was a complaint of the majority of stakeholders in Kahler and Gore's (2015) study. Similarly, Hoole's (2008) interviews with conservancy members revealed that 88% of respondents claimed to have received no benefits. This is significant because if community members are not benefiting from their involvement, their motivation to participate may lessen. Local villagers in Hoole's (2008) study identified poor management and priority setting as the key weaknesses of their conservancy. Boudreaux (2010) notes that conservancy members themselves acknowledge their weaknesses in the key business areas of financial management, accounting, and communication. This may stimulate the ongoing cycle of unfair benefit distribution.

In addition, conservancy members' livelihood and wellbeing can be impacted by the growth of wildlife numbers which are sustained for trophy hunting and safari purposes. Boudreaux and Nelson (2011) identified that the rise in animals used for hunting, such as zebras and kudus, has led to an increase in predators as well. Thus, conservancy members are increasingly losing small stock to predators such as lions, cheetahs and hyenas. Moreover, elephants that are being sustained for hunting have caused incidents among the community with damaged fences, eaten garden crops and usage of water designated for other purposes. Hoole (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate the methods used when dealing with the increase of sustained animals and found that one third of members had killed predators in order to protect their own lives and assets including livestock and farmland, which are counter-intuitive to the conservancy program. In addition, 73% of the interviewees were reported to have remained in fields during the day to keep watch on their assets. The impact in this study is a decrease in time for members to perform daily activities and pursue other potential business opportunities.

Bureaucratic issues can hinder efficiency and productivity as well. Some conservancy members report that they are required to obtain official permission to deal with the animals, which is very time consuming (Boudreaux, 2010). Then, compensation claims may not be honored due to bureaucratic issues (Khumalo & Yung, 2015). These persistent and cumulative problems of living in areas with human-wildlife conflict can take a psychological toll. Khumalo and Yung (2015) conclude that the effect of the risk of crop loss, injury and death result in pervasive fear and uncertainty, disguising as hidden impacts that harm the psycho-social well-being and mental health of community members. These findings support the need for stricter policies and better regulations in addressing human-wildlife conflicts (Barua, Bhagwat & Jadhav, 2012, p. 313). It is evident that members of communal conservancies have suffered daily inconvenience, loss of assets and even risk of their own lives.

There is also a rising concern of how the ecosystems of Namibia are being pressurized or altered by the activities promoted by communal conservancies. While trophy hunting is primarily the major source of revenue for conservancies, this activity can have direct and indirect effects on other animal species, native plants, and ecosystems (Ripple, Newsome & Kerley, 2016). For example, elephants may be fenced and their eating habits controlled with aims of fostering their growth for trophy hunting. In their investigation of this active herbivore management process, Legendijk, Page and Slotow (2011) warn of unintended and significant impacts on the ecosystems, such as changes in insect populations and overall biodiversity. Other research concluded that the overabundance of elephants lead to a decline in large trees and species such as birds, bats and insects who use the trees as their habitat (Cumming et al., as cited in Martin, 2005, p. 10). It can be argued that a problematic disruption of the ecosystem could be related to the increase in safari hunting activities that the conservancies encourage tourists to engage in. This issue requires further research.

Despite the strong evidence highlighting the detrimental effects that communal conservancies can cause, there are also benefits for their members and the environment. For instance, the program has contributed to improving the standard of living for many members. Naidoo et al.

(2016) conducted a study of 77 communal conservancies and found that members received both financial and in-kind benefits. These included income and meat distribution arising from hunting activities and employment from tourism related activities such as jobs at the lodges. Other research has found some health benefits. Riehl, Zerriffi, and Naidoo (2015) collected data from the Namibia Demographic and Health Surveys regarding the differences in health between those living within conservancies and those who did not. Their study revealed that the conservancy members had increased chances of bed-net ownership, reducing the likelihood of contracting malaria. Indeed, the conservancies are succeeding in many regards in their efforts to improve the living conditions of Namibia's poor citizens.

Based on the above evaluations, it can be concluded that a restructuring of systems and policies would be beneficial for the Namibian communal conservancies. Despite the reported benefits, including the increase in the standard of living that members experience such as better health and food supply, evidence shows that the conservancies do have detrimental impacts on the members and the environment. Poor financial management and unequal distribution of cash income amongst members is a pervasive issue, and property damage, personal safety issues, inadequate compensations for human wildlife conflict, and disruption of biodiversity and threatened ecosystems are other problematic areas. Thus, it is recommended that the government work proactively with the conservancies to ensure their sustainability by addressing these economic issues and reducing frequent human-wildlife conflicts. As the ecosystem can be imbalanced with greater conservation of larger wildlife, it would be beneficial to impose stricter laws on the conservation of certain animals sustained for revenue and conduct further investigations on how to maintain biodiversity. More research on these vital issues will aid in supporting the people, animals and lands of Namibia, and promoting the earth's biodiversity for future generations.

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