

DECOLONIZING CONSERVATION? CO-MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
IN BUSHBUCKRIDGE NATURE RESERVE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This case study seeks to assess the efficacy of co-management regimes in land reform initiatives through a qualitative, exploratory analysis of local perceptions of the co-management of natural resources in the newly protected area of Bushbuckridge Nature Reserve (BBR NR). Models for land reform through co-management have yet to be adequately or sufficiently molded to decentralizing development projects in Africa. Such development in Africa is rarely initiated by local communities, and in those rare cases, their voices fail to be incorporated into the decision-making processes of managing natural resources and wildlife. Local and/or Indigenous voices bring much needed richness and nuance to complex conservation management regimes yet they have been deemed incompatible or untranslatable with Western approaches that prize efficiency, quantifiable data, time, schedules, and international Science. Bridging binaries, or rather hybridizing ways of interpreting the world, come with a tangle of ambiguities regarding land use access and property rights.

Situated within the historical and political contexts of conservation and “global status of protected areas” (Zimmerer, 2006), land reform, the spatial and economic legacy of apartheid, and within local, national, and global power structures, how do local communities of Bushbuckridge, South Africa (1) negotiate, interpret, understand, and assess new environmental management regimes, (2) perceive the degree to which these regimes are equitable or empowering, and (3) assess their role in the participatory management of resources? Results suggest trust and capacity issues, as well as emergent colonial reproductions in the initial phase of amalgamating land reform, development, and co-management. Western values and conceptualizations of space continue to jeopardize local livelihoods while entrenching dependency on foreign development aid.