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UDC 338.48-6:502/504(680)
39:338.48(680)
Review paper
Received: June 16, 2010
Accepted: June 30, 2010

Culture for sale? ‘Traditional’ Practices, Institutions and Values as Commodity in Nature-based Tourism¹

The Maloti Drakenberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project between South Africa and Lesotho is a transfrontier conservation initiative that simultaneously aims at conserving biodiversity and fostering the economic development of the local population. This is to be attained via nature-based tourism activities. These, I argue, highlight certain practices, institutions and values of the local population while neglecting others, thereby reinventing them as part of a ‘traditional culture’ in the conservation context. Illustrated by two case studies I also argue that nature-based tourism reifies and commoditizes these elements of lifestyles by labeling them ‘traditional’, making them serve economic or environmental interests.

Keywords: nature protection, traditional culture, transfrontier conservation and development, ecotourism, South Africa

Nature conservation areas often come with two-fold goals, the protection of biodiversity and the development of the local population. In most cases this is to be attained via nature-based tourism², utilizing aspects of nature and of a ‘traditional’³ way of life of the local population as tourism attractors. This article aims to fill the gap between the more general claim of the conservation research community (Duffy 2006, West et al. 2006, Büscher & Dressler 2007, Dressler & Büscher 2008) about the commoditization of especially nature, and the specific local dynamics of nature-based tourism activities by introducing two empirical case studies illustrating the commoditization of ‘traditional’ practices, institutions and values.

On the basis of these cases, I argue that nature-based tourism highlights those practices, institutions and values of the local population that fit the image of ‘traditional’

¹ I would like to thank Niki Frantzeskaki for comments on a draft version of this article

² Also commonly referred to as ‘eco-tourism’

³ The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ are used interchangeably.

while neglecting those that do not. Thereby these elements are reinvented as part of a 'traditional' lifestyle, reinforced in the lives of the locals and turned into a commodity that serves other ends, such as economic or environmental interest. The cases are situated in the context of the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project (MDTP) located at the borders of South Africa and Lesotho. Research on the MDTP with a focus on the interaction of the nation state, the MDTP and the local population in the north-eastern part of Lesotho was carried out from January to April 2007. It involved participant observation, interviews and researching secondary sources.

The paper is structured as follows. Before presenting the empirical cases, a short history of nature conservation is given, focusing on the current trend of transfrontier conservation areas in general and the MDTP specifically. This is followed by a first case study examining a handicraft association that produces artifacts to be sold to tourists. This practice is highlighted above others and in the conservation and development discourse is reinvented as 'traditional' making it an attractor for tourists. It serves both the environmental interests of the MDTP by raising the awareness about the use of natural resources and the economic interests of the local population by offering an additional source of income. The second case study examines the interaction of the MDTP and the locally owned Mamohase Guest House. Being marketed as community-based, the guest house stands for values such as social cohesion and community solidarity, which are reinvented as 'traditional'. The Guest House owners jump on the bandwagon of the conservation and development discourse by promoting their business as being community-based and offering the tourist an authentic Basotho⁴ experience. Next to the MDTP, it is local actors labeling some of their community practices as 'traditional' so as to turn them into attractors for tourists serving first and foremost the economic ends of the owners. In the last part, the paper sums up and concludes with an outlook on the impact of using 'traditional culture' as marketing instruments on the interaction of conservation initiatives and the local population more generally by outlining possible ways for genuine interaction.

Nature conservation

In order to understand the problematic relationship between the local population and nature conservation, a short overview of the history of nature conservation on the African continent is presented. The focus is on the current trend of transfrontier conservation areas (TFCA's), exemplified by the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project (MDTP) where the case studies are situated.

⁴ Basotho (plural) and Mosotho (singular) are people of Sotho origin.

History

There are numerous overviews of the history and the more recent developments of nature conservation (Adams & Hulme 2001, Hutton et al. 2005, Büscher & Dressler 2007, Büscher 2010). Initial nature conservation objectives, which can be traced back to the colonial game hunting reserves, were of exclusionary and protectionist nature, based on the assumption that nature protection and human development do not go along. Together with other practices such as forced removal, enforcement of limited or no access to land and resources and general extension of state control through conservation laid the ground for a conflictual relation between people and parks. Taken together this is referred to as model of 'fortress conservation' (Brockington 2002). More people-centred approaches entered the debate in the 1970s from which community-based conservation emerged as a new model of interaction between parks and people⁵. As a more socially inclusive approach it emphasizes the need for community consultation, the value of communal traditions and ways of natural resource management as well as enhanced (negotiating) rights for rural people in terms of access to and sharing of resources, for instance in protected areas. Although community-based conservation is hegemonic in discourse it is not so in practice as emphasized by the conservation research community (Wolmer 2003, Büscher & Dressler 2007, Büscher 2010). Its practice has been entangled with the politics of bureaucracies and neoliberal economics, meaning the privileging of conservation ideals, a surge in protectionism, the disempowerment of the local population, the standardization of interventions and the application of the rules of the market (Dressler et al. 2010). To resurge from this crisis, Dressler et al. (2010:13) argue, community-based natural resource management should integrate its core values social justice, material well-being and environmental integrity and be "fluid in design, relative in practice and upheld with degrees of success rather than pre-designed absolute outcomes".

Transfrontier Conservation and Development Area (TFCA)

The latest trend in nature conservation in Southern Africa are transfrontier conservation and development areas (TFCAs). As the name suggests, these areas cut across national borders and usually subsume different land uses. Their main ambition is the protection and the conservation of biodiversity by aligning land tenure systems across borders. This comes along with the ambition to economically develop the local population through "job creation by developing nature conservation as a land use option" (Peace Parks Foundation Website 2010⁶). Adding a political dimension, the third ambition is the promotion of peace between nations, the reason for these areas to also being referred to as peace parks. Although committed to a community-based

⁵ The development towards more people-centered approaches mirrors the emphasis that the developed world put on bottom-up approaches, good governance and local participation. It is also an expression of the inability of poor and weak states to reinforce boundaries of protected areas against trespassers.

⁶ See Peace Parks Foundation http://www.peaceparks.org/Content_1020000000_Peace+Parks.htm, accessed June 14, 2010

conservation approach, the relation of the TFCAs with the local population is ambiguous. On the one hand, the local population and its practices are depicted as threats to biodiversity⁷ and as opponents of nature conservation. On the other hand, the local population is portrayed as traditional care-takers of their environment and partner in community-based conservation (see also Wolmer 2003, Draper et al. 2004, Spierenburg & Wels 2006, Büscher & Dressler 2007). So far, TFCAs have not been able to address power struggles about access to and use of land effectively (Duffy 2006, Hughes 2006, Büscher & Dressler 2007), and the situation of the local population deteriorated in many cases (Marcus 2001, Hughes 2006, West et al. 2006). TFCAs try to bridge the gap between nature conservation and human development through a variety of actions. These actions include public gatherings, awareness trainings aimed at educating the local population about the impact of their practices and most importantly nature-based tourism activities. The latter is portrayed as income generating alternative (West et al. 2006, Dressler & Büscher 2008).

Nature-based tourism

Nature-based tourism initiatives are often, though not always, part of what is referred to as Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs). The underlying assumption for ICDPs, which institutionalize alternative income generating activities, is that economic needs of the local population need to be satisfied first before conservation is possible (Marcus 2001). Even though ICDPs in general and nature-based tourism initiatives more specifically might be successful in enhancing income possibilities for the local population and emancipating women (West et al. 2006) they also receive major criticisms. The criticism points range from the generation of outsized (economic) expectations, unevenly distributed advantages, the exacerbation of social differences, the exclusion of locals not wishing to participate in tourism structures and higher pressure on local resources by tourists to a change in how people understand their surroundings (Orlove & Brush 1996, Marcus 2001, Duffy 2006, West & Brockington 2006, West et al. 2006).

The interaction of the tourist and the local is based on a simplistic image of the locals and their way of living (West et al. 2006) through essentialising cultural characteristics (Draper et al. 2004). Locals are referred to as living in 'authentic' or 'traditional' ways with a 'static culture' and 'in balance with nature'. This static, simplistic image is not only counter to current views of culture as process of joint meaning production and therefore fluid, interacting and complex. But it does also not allow for change or more specifically the (economic) development of the local population that is intended by introducing nature-based tourism (Draper et al. 2004). In the end, a tourist is not interested in a local driving a car to a daily 9-5 job. What seems to count is that 'authenticity' and 'traditional' culture sells, while in the process it is increasingly commoditized.

⁷ In the context of the TFCAs, see Peace Parks Foundation www.peaceparks.org, accessed March 25, 2010.

Through the neoliberalist turn in environmental governance flora and fauna are increasingly commoditized and turned into natural resources (Duffy 2006, Büscher & Dressler 2007, Dressler & Büscher 2008). On top of this also locals become commoditized as their 'culture' is turned into a value proposition in nature-based tourism (West et al. 2006). Although promoted by governments, funding institutions and private businesses as "ideal development strategy" (Duffy 2006:96), some even argue that neither people nor nature benefit from ecotourism (Carrier & McLead 2005, West & Carrier 2004, both in West et al. 2006).

The Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project (MDTP)

At the time of writing, four TFCA's are in a conceptual phase and ten TFCAs are actively being developed in Southern Africa⁸. One of the latter is the MDTP that stretches across the borders of Lesotho and South Africa. Its objectives are to conserve the natural (biodiversity) and cultural (San rock art) heritage of the mountain range, to economically develop the local population through tourism and to promote peace between the two adjoining states, Lesotho and South Africa.

In signing a Memorandum of Understanding in 2001, Lesotho and South Africa agreed on the establishment of the MDTP. As of 2003, for a total period of six years, it was funded by the Global Environment Fund (GEF), which made the World Bank its implementing agency. Support in the form of money and expertise also came from the Peace Parks Foundation (Peace Parks Foundation Website 2010⁹). During this time a 20-year strategy for the area was drawn and since the end of the funding by the international agencies in December 2009, the national governments fund smaller teams¹⁰ charged with the implementation work.

The mountainous area covers some 13.000 km² with an altitude range from around 1300 to the highest peak of 3482 metres above sea level and is an important water resource for both countries. Hosting almost two million people, the area subsumes a variety of land uses¹¹ and combines different tenure systems. It includes parts of three districts in Lesotho (Butha-Buthe, Mokhotlong, Quacha's Nek) and parts of three provinces in South Africa (KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, Eastern Cape). Each of these hosted a local office of the MDTP at the time of the GEF funding.

⁸ See Peace Parks Foundation http://www.peaceparks.org/Content_1060000000_Maps.htm, accessed June 8, 2010

⁹ See Peace Parks Foundation http://www.peaceparks.org/Parks_1022100000_0_0_0_0_4_Maloti-Drakensberg+TFCA+Maloti-Drakensberg.htm, accessed June 14, 2010

¹⁰ In the previous years, the institutional structure included a bilateral Project Steering Committee that was composed of the Project Coordination Committees of both countries respectively (staffed with pertinent government organizations). The daily implementation work was done by national Project Coordination Units

¹¹ These are National Parks, Nature Reserves, commercial farms, subsistence farming, grazing land, range management areas and settlements.

As commonly found in other TFCAs, also the MDTP identifies the local population as exploiting the natural resources¹² unsustainably and as vandalising cultural resources. One of the attempted ways to bridge the gap between conservation and the local population is nature-based tourism. While at the beginning of the project, the MDTP staff strongly believed that tourism would change behavior around land use, they had departed from this assumption at a later stage¹³. Instead of thinking of tourism as *the* strategy offering an *alternative* livelihood, they now thought of it as *a* tool offering an *additional* livelihood strategy. This is also suggested by Büscher & Dressler (2007), arguing that tourism is only additional cash income for the rural population that continues to depend on natural resources. The MDTP staff named “*lack of confidence*” and “*fear of responsibility*”¹⁴ of the locals as reasons for the fact that they did not benefit as expected from the possibilities offered. As is seemingly common practice in ‘development world’ (Crewe & Harrison 1998, West et al. 2006), it was thus the local population and its ‘cultural barriers’ that were blamed for the failure of the nature-based tourism strategies in offering alternative livelihood options to subsistence farming, cash-crop farming, cattle and livestock herding and others¹⁵.

The case studies

The two following case studies are situated within the Butha Buthe District in Lesotho as part of the MDTP area. On this local level, the MDTP hosted a District Office, where next to the District Conservation officer and a Field Technician, three Community Facilitators were employed. They were responsible for the interaction with the local population. While one was responsible for the outreach to another district, the two others were working on tourism and development issues as well as the cultural heritage sites and Managed Resource Area respectively.

There were several pilot projects each with its own geographical and thematic focus. Sustainable resource management was to be attained by the setting up of a Managed Resource Area (with a Managed Resource Council for community participation) as well as through the many awareness trainings and public gatherings discussing land use practices. Explicitly aimed at the protection of biodiversity was the proposition and development of a designated area as a national park. Other projects focused on the

¹² This exploitation is done by timber plantations, cropping, commercial uses and uncontrolled grazing regimes due to communal land access. For further information, see MDTP website http://maloti.opencms.co.za/site/bilateral_projects/Project_Description.html, accessed June 8, 2010

¹³ As witnessed by the author during a bilateral meeting of the Project Coordination Units in Butha Buthe, Lesotho on January 17-18, 2007.

¹⁴ Both quotes are from a discussion in the Livelihood and Tourism Working Group at the above mentioned bilateral meeting.

¹⁵ According to Turner et al. (2001) the Basotho in Lesotho engage in subsistence agriculture, sharecropping, cash-crop farming, cattle and livestock herding, relying on pensions and remittances, piece jobs (transport, weeding, renting out rooms), labour migration to South Africa, wage labour, self-employment, handicraft (knitting, brick making), illegal practices and a reliance on social networks.

tourism and development component, such as the development of the Cultural Heritage Sites Butha-Buthe Plateau and Liphofung (with San rock art), both with their respective Community Conservation Forum. Other institutions were the District Steering Committee acting as tourism-related platform of stakeholders as well as associations for e.g. handicraft makers and pony tracking. Furthermore the MDTP offered trainings in hospitality, for becoming an archeological assistant or a birding or hiking guide to selected locals. Although this sounds impressive, research in the village of Ha Molapo, which is situated within a 30km radius of the main sites mentioned, showed that the majority of the interviewees did not know about the MDTP and its work.

Handicraft production

'Ntate Mpho has different ways of sustaining his livelihood. Next to farming, he makes around 30 handcrafted hats per month that he sells to locals, tourists and curio shops in the capital as well as in the nearby city Butha Buthe. The hats are made out of special grass which his daughters collect for him. Because of his skills he was chosen by the MDTP to teach others how to make such hats. For the training he received 3500 Maloti.'¹⁶

The story of Ntate Mpho is one that the MDTP would like to multiply. To begin with, this first case study describes how the MDTP seeks to turn handicraft production based on natural resources into a daily income generating activity. Subsequently this is analyzed in the light of the argument that nature-based tourism through highlighting certain practices above others and labeling them as 'traditional', reinforces and commoditizes them.

In the Butha Buthe district, the MDTP initiated and funded a six-week handicraft training in 2006. In line with the community-based approach the training was provided by local practitioners of leatherwork, grass work, pottery, art, weaving and horn work, one of whom was Ntate Mpho. Most of the trainees had not done handicrafts before. Coached by one of the Community Facilitators, twenty-one of the newly trained handicraft producers formed a handicraft association named "Baballa lihloiloeng me o Phele Malefiloane"¹⁷. Four men and seventeen women joined first the training and then the association in order to learn how to make handicrafts, to keep records and to earn money. Selling their products to three curio shops, the total income of all members added up to 9170 Maloti over a of 6 months period. The members are paid per piece and the more productive members earn more; thus the income is not evenly distributed amongst them. One of these more productive members exchanged beer brewing for handicraft production, because she regarded it as a more easy way to earn the school fees for her children. Another motive for being member

¹⁶ Based on field notes and an interview with Ntate Mpho on January 22, 2007. Maloti is the currency of Lesotho.

¹⁷ Translation from Sesotho: "We conserve to live out of what we conserved, Malefiloane".

of the association is the access to credit of which members made extensive use. They borrowed money in order to pay for school fees and study trips, as well as for purchasing medicine, soap, sewing thread and gas. More implicit motives are the study tours as well as the weekly meetings. These provide the possibility to socialize and to take the time to handcraft. One member said that she produces most of her handcrafted hats during the meetings, as her daily schedule does not allow much time otherwise, which is true for many more of the members. Accommodating the farming duties, the weekly meetings start only at eleven and are suspended altogether in the harvesting period. The fact that the handicraft production needs to fit in busy lives also becomes clear when looking at the attendance of the meetings. Out of the 21 members, on average seven attend the weekly meetings, others being on maternity leave, engaged in temporary paid jobs, out on cattle posts or having other commitments.

As the creation of artifacts is based on the availability of natural resources, such as grass, clay, wool and leather, the conservation of these, so the MDTP hopes, is rendered directly relevant to the lives of the local population. During interviews with the association members under the, most probably influencing, attendance of the MDTP Community Facilitator, it becomes clear that they adopt the MDTP discourse to a certain extent. They state that only now, through using natural resources for handicraft production they know how important conservation is. Although showing increased awareness of conservation issues, the members do not transfer this insight to their daily activities such as farming or herding. 'Natural resources' for them only refers to the raw material for handicraft production.

All the above suggests that, although the association members pay lip service to the idea of nature conservation neither tourism nor conservation is central to their life worlds. Rather than being an ordinary daily practice, handicraft production is something that most of the group members had not done before. It is only for the trainers, such as Ntate Mpho that handcrafting is a daily activity and an important, though not even for him exclusive income strategy. Handicraft production for the members then is filling a gap in their daily schedule and their purses and is therefore an interchangeable livelihood strategy¹⁸. This mirrors what Turner et al. (2001) state about the livelihood strategies in Lesotho, where locals "must tackle tensions between livelihood motives and values, balance threats and opportunities, and strive for strategies that make the most of fluctuating personal relationships within households, between households and across the local and broader community" (Turner et al. 2001:5). Handicraft production is thus peripheral to the life worlds of the members of the handicraft group, let alone to the majority of the locals. Additionally, this marginal practice is thus singled out in the conservation and development discourse and reinvented as part of a 'traditional' lifestyle and as such serves as attractor for tourists. The particular practice of handcrafting is highlighted at the expense of others, such as farming, brewing beer, working in the mines or in the Asian shops. Moreover by only focusing on the possible and seemingly marginal economic or ecological impacts of nature-based

¹⁸ That conservation actors cannot provide viable alternative income generating strategies is also described by Marcus (2001) for the Malagasy context.

tourism, other positive side effects such as access to credit, meetings as social venue or a broadening of world views through study trips are overlooked.

Community-based guest house

“Bolae and Morebane Ramonotsi have various ways of sustaining their livelihood. Although the brothers tell MDTP staff, institutional visitors and ecotourism consultants that they are dependent on the income of their guest house, reality is more complex than that. They supplement their irregular income from the self-initiated Mamohase Guest House by working on the family fields, as founders and active members of three associations (Moteng Ponytracking Association, Manka Farming Association and Mahaneng TOUR Association) and as secretary and chair of the District Steering Committee of the MDTP. The MDTP provided them with several trainings focusing on hospitality, cultural heritage and environmental management. In addition Morebane works as assistant in MDTP-initiated archaeological work and as electoral assistant, while Bolae stood candidate for the national parliamentary elections in 2007. For their involvement in such a diverse array of activities they are regarded as greedy, while they see these activities as essential livelihood strategies.”¹⁹

The story of the brothers Ramonotsi is again one that the MDTP would like to multiply. The first part of this case study describes how the MDTP supports the brothers with trainings and plans to replicate this example of local entrepreneurship in other places – as was the case with the handicraft production. Secondly, it describes how the brothers as owners of the Mamohase Guest House apply the approach of the MDTP themselves. By promoting their guest house as community-based and offering tourists a “unique insight into genuine Lesotho village life [...] an ‘African experience’” (Coastingafrica 2007:292), they take advantage of the nature-based tourism discourse. In both parts a description of the setting is given and subsequently analyzed in the light of the argument that nature-based tourism through highlighting certain practices, values and institutions above others and labeling them as ‘traditional’, reinforces and commoditizes them.

The Mamohase Guest House is situated some 27 km from Butha Buthe in the village of Ha Molapo. In 2002 just before the MDTP started, Bolae and Morebane Ramonotsi, turned one of their family huts into a guest house, a second one followed soon. The clay huts basically consist of one room each and are decorated in ‘traditional’ Basotho fashion with wall paintings, handcrafted hats and loin cloth. Visitors can choose from a wide range of offerings, all of which the brothers claim are community-based: village walks with visits to the healer, the chief, the school and the only shop; guided trails to caves with original San rock art; guided hiking to the herdboys up in the mountains; fishing; traditional dance and singing performances and pony tracking tours.

¹⁹ Based on field notes and several interviews with Morebane and Bolae Ramonotsi in the period from January to April 2007

In five double beds they host around 300 people a year with visitors coming mainly from the Netherlands, Germany or South Africa and staying around 3 to 4 nights.

The Mamohase Guest House with its community-based approach acts as a role model for the MDTP. When talking to outsiders, the brothers emphasize their merits for the community of Ha Molapo. According to the plans of an eco-tourism consultant hired by the MDTP, the Mamohase Guest House would be connected to two other planned guest houses through a hiking trail. While one of the additional guest houses is to be situated along the only tarred road as a kind of motel, the other is to be located in the 'picturesque' village of Malefiloane²⁰, which is only reachable with a 4x4 and stands for the 'purity of traditional life'²¹. Mé Thipana was chosen by the MDTP as possible guest house owner. As she does not speak any English, her granddaughter would take care of the tourists and attend the necessary trainings. She reassures that the whole community would profit from tourism mainly through the performance of traditional dances and songs and the selling of handicrafts. The consultant intends to ask the Mamohase owner Bolae Ramonotsi to train the two future owners and to form an association with them in exchange for marketing the Mamohase Guest House on a joint website. The Mamohase owner is more reserved about these ideas. In his opinion there are not enough tourists for all these new structures and therefore the new guest houses and associations are doomed to fail. He struggles with the MDTP about these plans to establish more guest houses and giving money to new structures instead of investing into existing structures, such as his guest house and his community-based associations. Other voices from within the community qualify him as greedy and as not sharing with the community but only within a network of friends and family.

This strategy of the MDTP does not explicitly mention but implicitly highlights certain values, such as 'social cohesion' or 'community solidarity' while neglecting others. The black box of 'community' is not questioned and consequently social cohesion and community solidarity are labelled as inherent part of a 'traditional' Basotho lifestyle and are commoditized in the process of establishing a series of guest houses in the region. As the reaction of Bolae Ramonotsi to the consultant's idea and also the reaction of the community to his practices illustrate, there is not one homogenous community; rendering the idea of inherent social cohesion and community solidarity obsolete. The empirical findings are in line with some of the criticisms of nature-based tourism as discussed earlier. There are outsized expectations generated with Mé Thipana and advantages distributed unevenly with the owners of the Mamohase Guest House receiving a great share of trainings and thereby assuring their social position.

On another level, this case study illustrates how the brothers situate themselves as brokers between the development agents (MDTP) and the local population. In fact, they see themselves as intermediaries, giving guidelines to other locals, who would 'not understand how to do it'. In this position they do not only take full advantage of the

²⁰ Malefiloane is also the meeting place of the handicraft association, some 10 km from the Mamohase Guest House.

²¹ Both quotes were made by the eco-tourism consultant in February 2007 during a working visit to Malefiloane.

possibilities offered by the MDTP, but also of the situation of their fellow villagers. Their proposition to tourists relies on their ability to highlight and reinvent certain practices and labeling them 'genuine', 'traditional' or 'authentic', while disregarding others as outlined below based on their 'expertise' as locals. During the village tour, the tourist visits the healer not the clinic – although the majority of the villagers consults the clinic in case of sickness. They visit the chief not the community council – although most of the formal power lies with the community council. They visit the school not the pub – although alcoholism is a big issue amongst the former miners²² and finally they visit the local shop not the Asian-owned supermarket in Butha Buthe – as villagers like to do for the things they do not harvest from their fields. Tourists are offered pony tracking as the Basotho type of transport while Moruti, a third brother of the Ramonotsi's is doing his driver's license. These are only some examples of the reinvention of institutions and practices through labeling them 'traditional' and thereby turning them into a commodity serving the economic interest of the brothers. And even for them, as the introductory statement showed, their guest house is only an additional source of income, next to a lot of others.

This second case study examined the interaction of the Mamohase Guest House with the MDTP. Not only does the MDTP utilize the rather successful strategy of the Guest House to reinvent values such as social cohesion and community solidarity as part of the nature-based tourism approach. The owners of the Mamohase Guest House themselves jump on the bandwagon of the conservation and development discourse by promoting their Guest House as being community-based and offering the tourist an authentic Basotho experience. Here it is not only the MDTP, but local actors labeling some of their community practices as 'traditional' or 'authentic' so as to turn them into valued propositions for tourists.

Conclusion

After introducing the history and current trends of nature conservation in Africa, I focused in this article on nature-based tourism activities as bridging the gap between human development and nature conservation through their promise of alternative income generation. This mechanism is employed in conservation practice to such an extent, that West et al (2006:262) claim that "ecotourism enterprises are symbiotic with protected areas". Zooming in on the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project (MDTP) I presented two case studies. With these I showed that the highlighting and reinvention of certain (marginal) practices, values and institutions as 'traditional' or 'authentic' is part of a nature-based tourism approach. In this process, 'traditional' elements (handcrafting, social cohesion, community solidarity, chief) serve as tourism attractors and are turned into commodities for the tourism

²² Around 98% of the male population of Ha Molapo had been working in the mines of the Gauteng region of South Africa in peak times.

industry serving the ecological ends of the conservation initiative and the economic end of the local population. The MDTP takes successful locals, such as the handicraft producer Ntate Mpho and the guest house owners Bolae and Morebane Ramonotsi as role models to train others in the singled out practices of running a community-based guest house or making handicrafts. Thereby these practices and the attached values are highlighted above others, such as brewing beer, farming or individual merit. In the end the tourism-related strategies are only additional livelihood strategies, also for the trainers. Clearly, nature-based tourism does not shift dependency of people away from land. On the one hand it only offers an additional livelihood strategy, so people still depend on land for subsistence farming. On the other hand dependency on what is to be understood as 'conserved land' is perpetuated.

The inherent tension in nature-based tourism is the static image of a 'traditional way of life' on the one hand, and the economic but also social developments that it strives for on the other. Part of the practices, values and institutions that are neglected are those that suggest or are associated with development and change. The local population aspires owning TVs and mobile phones although they have no electricity; a car, although the roads are bad; a brick house instead of one made out of clay. But these developments are not on the agenda of the MDTP or any other TFCA as they are seemingly unrelated to conservation issues. Nature-based tourism activities perpetuating a static image of 'traditional' practices, institutions and values fall short their promise of bridging the gap between development and conservation.

In the conservation discourse, development that is to be achieved via nature-based tourism is only paying lip service to the current paradigm of a people-centered conservation approach. It does not take the life projects and the livelihood strategies of the local population as starting point, but biodiversity conservation. Especially designers and practitioners of conservation initiatives should start by framing the problem to be tackled with the local population in a co-creation process, not privileging positivist knowledge above locally specific knowledge. A specific, context embedded framing of the problem will most probably not lead to pre-designed universally applicable and standardized solutions but similarly to a specific and context-embedded long term development strategy. Starting from the local life worlds of people combined with outside knowledge it is about outlining principles of how people want to live together and treat their resources in a specific part of the world. This then, is the start of a continuous and ongoing transformation process with no deliberate absolute outcome but relative principles. Instead of the universally applied, not context-embedded nature-based tourism activities, I propose that the conservation and development discourse and practice could benefit from looking integrally and taking both the socially, culturally and historically constituted life worlds as well as the need for the sustainable use of our ending resources as a starting point for developing long-term regional strategies.

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