The Elephant in the Room? Problematising 'New' (Neoliberal) Biodiversity Conservation

Sian Sullivan
Lecturer,
School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia

Abstract

As argued recently in *Forum for Development Studies*, a 'back to the barriers' approach to biodiversity conservation is again prevalent, after some two decades of emphasis on 'community-based' initiatives. This involves the establishment and expansion of national parks from which people are variously excluded. In this article, however, I suggest that community-based approaches such as Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) remain important, and in many ways simply constitute the other side of the same coin of modern conservation practice under the political and economic, and cultural, value-frame of neoliberalism. My aim is to highlight some shared conceptualisations and rationalisations regarding perceptions of 'the environment' and of people–environment relationships that inform both of these two broad-brush policy and practical orientations towards 'biodiversity conservation'. The article thus draws on a Foucaultian analytics to 'problematise' the contemporary and globalising neoliberal *episteme* within which both these approaches are produced; and to open a space where orientations (towards 'the environment') that are 'othered' and thereby silenced by this frame might be articulated.

Keywords: biodiversity conservation, neoliberalism, Foucault, problematise, episteme, Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM), environment, globalisation, 'other', incommensurable values, sustainability

1. Introduction[1]

In the last volume of *Forum for Development Studies*, Hutton *et al*. (2005) argue that the dominant narrative returning to inform biodiversity conservation policy and practice is that of 'back to the barriers'. This is characterised by 'a return to more traditional approaches' including the establishment and expansion of national

1 This is a revised version of a piece that began as thoughts as a discussant at a workshop on 'Land, livelihoods, democracy and conservation: conflicting interests and emerging realities in southern Africa', facilitated by the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town, July 2004. I am grateful for the invitation to participate in this workshop. An earlier and shorter version is published in Italian (Sullivan, 2005a).

parks from which people are variously excluded (Hutton *et al*., 2005: 341). It is suggested that in part this is a response to critique of the 'new' 'community-based' conservation approaches that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s as attempts to combine both rural development and nature conservation objectives. Such critique has focused on failure to deliver in both development and conservation terms. It responds to a range of phenomena: observations of departures between rhetoric and reality in the implementation of community-oriented approaches to conservation; problematic or corrupt distribution of income; confusions generated by a proliferation of local resource management institutions, sometimes in competition with local government; the emergence of protest and conflict as the expectations of recipients, participants and partners have not been met; and poor biodiversity conservation outcomes.[2]

It is indeed the case that the setting aside of land for the purposes of biodiversity conservation has remained firmly on the agenda, despite the 'new' community-oriented approaches of the neoliberal era.[3] In general these approaches, via recommendations from donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), have emphasised the devolution and decentralisation of decision-making power to new local management and governance institutions at the same time as creating new markets for, and income-generating possibilities from, biodiversity. In contrast, and as a primary means of meeting the challenges and desires articulated in the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity (CBD, 2006 (2002)), the establishment

2 For a selection of such varied critique from a range of geographical circumstances, see, for example, Marks (1984, 1999), Hackel (1999), Alexander and McGregor (2000), Attwell and Cotterill (2000), Chatty and Colchester (2002), Anderson and Berglund (2003), Long (2004), Homewood (2005), Iversen *et al*. (2006) and Ribot (2006).

3 By neoliberalism I refer to the coalescence of globalising political and economic policies that flow from the Washington Consensus drawn up in 1989 by economic advisors to the major international financial institutions (primarily the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). This global(ising) economic framework is complex in structure and effects but includes: deregulation of international finance flows; protection of business interests, in part via the establishment of so-called 'free trade' regions; and structural adjustment programmes to which 'developing' countries are expected to agree and adhere in order to access donor funds for development purposes. These introduce a range of conditionalities, frequently oriented towards the opening up of 'southern' markets and utilities to international business, and the 'rolling back of the state' to permit further trade and donor permeability in such contexts. Major international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) have mushroomed in this context to fill the facilitating and implementation vacuum left in circumstances of weakened states and public sectors (see, for example, Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Stiglitz, 2002; Chapin, 2004). The ways in which the combination of such structuring processes have vested sovereignty in locations beyond the nation state has famously become termed *Empire* by Hardt and Negri (2000).

of protected areas is again flourishing with the support of major donor organisations, environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) and business (see, for example, Chapin, 2004). As Brockington *et al*., (2006: 250) observe, '[p]rotected areas have expanded threefold in recent years, and the stricter category 1–4 protected areas[4] now number some 49,000 and cover 6 per cent of the land surface of the planet'.

At the same time, however, community-oriented approaches remain significant, both as a means of offsetting the exclusions effected by conservation models that require the separation of land and 'natural resources' from alternative uses, and in the plethora of initiatives encapsulated by the frames of 'Community-Based Natural Resources Management' (CBNRM) and Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) (see, for example, Fabricius *et al*. (2004) and Long (2004) for southern African contexts). The distinctive 'pro-poor, pro-wildlife and pro-tourism' orientation associated with southern African CBNRM, for example, also appears to be inspiring and/or informing similar initiatives elsewhere (for a Cambodian example, see IIED, 2006: 1). And in some circumstances CBNRM projects are instituted *within* parks, as is the case with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) CBNRM project that has been underway since 2001 in Niassa National Reserve in northern Mozambique (see, for example, Jones, 2005). In other words, it appears to be somewhat too soon to write the obituary for CBNRM and associated community-based approaches to biodiversity conservation.

In many ways, however, these two broad orientations to 'biodiversity conservation' (that is, 'fines and fences' *versus* community participation and empowerment) can also be seen as two sides of the same coin; as related pragmatic policy tendencies flowing from a broader and globalising *cultural*, or even epistemic (see below), orientation to 'biodiversity conservation' and to people in relation to this. The fabric of this conceptual orientation is dynamically woven and produced from some key threads of thought and practice. Implicit and systemic, for example, is a seemingly inevitable shifting of 'the environment' and of local practice into global domains of modernisation, governmentality, decision-making and desire (see, for example, Escobar, 1996; Goldman, 2001; Young, 2002; Steiner *et al*., 2003). This is a process that while pragmatic and produc-

4 As defined by the World Parks Congress and its convenor, the World Conservation Union (Redford *et al*., 2006: 1).

tive – as evidenced by the exponential increase of international treaties, meetings, conventions and global finance flows oriented towards biodiversity conservation (see, for example, Hajer, 1995; Blaikie, 1999) – is also in serious tension with *other* knowledge frames and experiences regarding 'the environment'. As such, it produces layers of subtle displacements of alternative values and autonomy. This becomes the inexorable creation of what Bauman (1998: 2–3) refers to as '[t]he discomforts of localized existence', whereby what determines *value* tends increasingly to be located elsewhere. Value frames and understandings that this 'elsewhere' cannot perceive simultaneously become located at the 'outside' of this global political economic, and cultural, shift. A second thread is the coupling of these globalising environmental governance and finance frames with an uncritical acceptance of commoditisation processes, and the naturalisation of global market values which again are produced elsewhere. This effectively means that 'if it can't pay it can't stay', and permits a process whereby 'biodiversity conservation' is perversely and cynically transformed into big business (see, for example, Brockington and Igoe, under review), or at least into useful, if remarkably dislocated, marketing tools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sold! Elephant and African wilderness used to sell a terraced house in Dorset, UK, under the advertising slogan of 'A Different Animal'. Photo: Sian Sullivan, 2005.

These threads comprise 'the elephant in the room'[5] of my title: the naturalised *presence* of neoliberalism that produces the 'business as usual' of contemporary conservation discourse and practice. A presence that is so present it is absent, such that what this frame *others* becomes unnoticeable, and thereby silent (see Ingold, 2000; Irigaray, 2002; Habermann, 2004; Sullivan, 2005b). Modern biodiversity conservation, whether produced in parks, CBRNM programmes, or international meetings of donors and policymakers to discuss the fate of 'the global environment', thus requires and reproduces acceptable conceptualisations of, and relationships with, the presentable, packageable, consumable and manageable objects of 'nature', 'biodiversity' or 'the environment'. A 'nature' with which human relationships are reduced to sustainable consumption and custodial practices, whether direct or indirect, for livelihoods or for profit. Alternative framings and praxes of what might also be conceptualised and experienced as the dynamic, affective and inalienable 'single community' of 'culturenature' (see Ingold, 2000) tend to become suppressed (or coopted) in the process.[6] These values comprise the 'elephant in the room' – the multiplicitous avoidances – of the conservation discourse which emerges from and sustains, the modern, and currently neoliberal, *episteme* (see Foucault, 1970 (1966)).[7]

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5 The 'elephant in the room' is an English idiom or expression that refers to a 'problem that very obviously stands, but which is ignored for the convenience of one or other party'. Its metaphorical and symbolic strength derives 'from the fact that an elephant would indeed be conspicuous and remarkable in a small room', and 'thus the idiom also implies a value judgment that the issue *should* be discussed openly', but is being excluded from discussion so as to deny the attention that the issue warrants (Wikipedia, 2006a). As such, the idiom suggests that it is a combination of ignorance or denial, and of the power of interest groups who would wish to silence discussion of an issue, that prevents engagement with what might actually carry significance of elephantine proportions.

6 Such an orientation would break down the dichotomy between biocentric and anthropocentric sources of value to affirm movements between human and nonhuman worlds that are less bounded, more relational and mutually constitutive. For reviews of biocentric and anthropocentric positions *vis-à-vis* biodiversity see, for example, Hampicke (1994) and Pepper (1996).

7 'Episteme' is the term used by Foucault (1970 (1966)) to describe the assumed or *a priori* knowledge of reality – the knowledge that is taken as given – that infuses and permits sense-making to occur in all discursive interactions flowing from and reinforcing a historical period or epoch. It is similar to but much broader in scale than Thomas Kuhn's use of the term 'paradigm'. The latter describes the discursive processes that frequently constrain the production of scientific knowledge to within the boundaries of 'normal science' parameters (Kuhn, 1970 (1962)). As such, a normal science paradigm would comprise only part of acceptable and intelligible knowledge building the episteme of an epoch. It is also similar to an understanding of 'culture' as the shared norms and

It seems important to open discussion regarding these structures and silences, not least because framing conservation and development success in terms of market value, income generation, financial investment opportunities, numbers saved (of species and individuals), and other 'management goals', surely reproduces the value-frames that generate the biodiversity losses and other exclusions associated with modernity. This article then is an attempt to draw out and 'problematise'[8] (Foucault, 1992 (1984)), some of the conceptual 'backspaces' infusing the extension of neoliberal values to the design and practice of *in situ* biodiversity conservation. In the main I focus discussion on those approaches encapsulated by the frame of 'Community-Based Natural Resources Management'. This so-called 'new' conservation of CBNRM and the related creation of Integrated Conservation and Development Projects or ICDPs, attempts to address issues of equity and rural development by creating pathways whereby local 'communities' can benefit from, and ultimately hold decision-making power over, 'wildlife resources'. As such, it has been celebrated as a radical departure from the exclusive, centralised and alienating 'fortress' conservation practices of the past. Importantly, these initiatives embrace and reinforce the policy discourse and frame of 'sustainable development': that is, the paradoxical imperative of 'economic growth that is environmentally sound' (Sachs and Reid, 2006: 1002). A recent and surprisingly Malthusian evocation of this discourse thus iterates the necessity of mitigating environmentally degrading population growth in 'the South', through investment in global 'environmental assets', and support for an 'interdisciplinary science of sustainable development' led by '[l]eading scientific institutions' (presumably largely of 'the North') (Sachs and Reid, 2006: 1002).

values that infuse and produce community in all spheres of praxis and language. An episteme thus guides and influences the social production of *discourses* – or empowered knowledge frames – that at the same time iteratively reproduce what epistemologically is, and becomes, shared as self-evident about the nature of reality. *Narratives* can be considered as coherent 'storylines', which in collaboration – that is, when shared by actors in a speech community – produce discourses or variously empowered 'truths' regarding phenomena. For a useful disaggregation of discourses and narratives in the field of political ecology, see Benjaminsen and Svarstad (under review).–

8 That is, to open a critical discussion about a field of accepted knowledge, and therefore to draw attention to problems that may be associated with that knowledge (see Wikipedia, 2006b).

In this article, I iterate that as a product of neoliberal approaches to 'the environment' and to people as 'human resources', 'new' conservation is severely constrained in terms of how qualitatively different – how 'new' – it is able to become in relation to the value-frames guiding the modern ideology and practice of nature conservation. I comment further on some pragmatic questions embodied by the discourse and measures of 'sustainability', in both environmental and economic terms, that are desired by such initiatives. For case material I draw primarily on the emerging communal area 'conservancies' of Namibia's CBNRM programme. Namibia is a country where I have several years' direct experience and ongoing contact. Here, a national CBNRM programme has been funded in the main by USAID (the United States Agency for International Development), WWF (the World Wide Fund for Nature) and now the GEF (the Global Environment Facility of the World Bank), that is, the division of the World Bank created to fund work carried out to support the Convention on Biological Diversity (Young, 2002). This national programme has been internationally acclaimed as southern Africa's most progressive, people-centred conservation initiative (Sutherland, 1998). My intention is not to single this programme out for critique, but to draw on its unfolding as a means of grounding some of my comments regarding the accepted values of modern biodiversity conservation discourse and practice. These comments are intended as movement into an 'honest' problematisation of the 'new' neoliberal episteme – the shifting grid of self-reinforcing conceptual reference points – that structures contemporary valuations of and relationships with 'the global environment', and which produces the current imperative of nature/biodiversity conservation. By honest, I mean an attempt to speak of the ways in which these approaches do little to critique or reorganise – in fact they reproduce, proliferate, enhance and sustain – the values producing both contemporary biodiversity loss and the displacement of other value-frames in relation to this.

2. Incommensurable Values?

> The bankers decree the mode of payment. Albert must promote the sale of indulgences for Pope Leo X in his territory. The faithful will make a contribution to the construction of St Peter's basilica and will receive a certificate in exchange: the Pope absolves them of their sins (Blissett, 2003 (2000): x).

Reflecting on CBNRM in southern Africa[9] – that is, as a continuing significant orientation to biodiversity conservation – can generate something of a paradox. It would be churlish not to recognise the extraordinary successes of the architects of CBNRM in reading and participating in the neoliberal zeitgeist of the post cold-war period, and thereby in capturing large amounts of donor funding for the 'linking' (Jacobsohn, 1992) of conservation and development agendas in 'the South'.[10] CBNRM initiatives have thus facilitated the means whereby rural people can access monetary, employment and other opportunities arising from globalisation processes under neoliberalism, largely from increased wildlife-based tourism enterprises. They have also generated important institutional frameworks for building and enhancing local infrastructural and governance structures related to livelihood activities connecting people and landscapes. In Namibia's CBNRM programme these relate primarily to the establishment of communal-area conservancies, which are described in more detail in Inset 1.

On the other hand, it seems important that there are spaces for speaking of the paradox that is generated by the ways in which the CBNRM framework claims to be radically progressive, whilst maintaining a thoroughly modernist, and globalising – or even colonising – agenda in how people–environment relationships are conceived, structured and experienced, and in how 'the non-human world' is measured and valued (see Jensen, 2000; Mabey, 2006). As such, existing and empowered *structural* patterns of inequality seem to be little transformed, and may even be enhanced, within the contexts of these neoliberal programmes. Given that we inhabit an era of multiple violences and violations towards both 'the environment' and to people whose possibilities for self-determination are margin-

9 In southern Africa USAID and other donors fund national CBNRM programmes in a number of countries including Botswana (Natural Resources Management Programme, NRMP), Zimbabwe (Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, CAMPFIRE), Zambia (Administrative Management Design, ADMADE) and Namibia (Living In a Finite Environment, LIFE).

10 For example, Namibia's LIFE programme received some US$ 25 million between 1993 and 2000. Of this, US$ 14 million was channelled to the primary facilitating NGO, Integrating Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC), between 1992 and 1999 (Durbin *et al*., 1997: 28; Callihan, 1999: 6–7). A further US$ 12 million from USAID was approved to carry the Namibian CBNRM programme from late 1999 to 2004. IRDNC also received Swiss Francs 2,794,550 from WWF-Intern towards its work in Kunene Region, north-west Namibia, between 1996 and 2001 (Jones, 1999a: 76). Currently the programme has entered a new phase of funding via the GEF.

alised by globalising value-frames (see, for example, Galtung, 1969; Bourdieu, 1998; Bourgois, 2001; Sullivan 2005c) then speaking of and critiquing these processes – noticing the elephant in the room that participates in producing these violences – surely becomes a necessary component of reflection and interpretation.

Inset 1. Namibian conservancies: a history (adapted from Sullivan, 2002a: 162–165)

The term 'conservancy' emerged in the 1970s in an apartheid-structured South Africa to describe the consolidation of exclusive rights over animal wildlife among cooperating white settler farmers, largely through the employment of game guards to militate against 'poaching' by black African 'neighbours'(Wels, 1999). Furthering the 'ecological apartheid' of the protected area system, conservancies were seen in this context as the only '…viable alternative for the *salvation* of wildlife on private land' in a context where it was considered that '[f]ailure to provide security and management for wildlife on private land must, inevitably, lead to its demise' (Collinson, 1983: 167, in Wels, 1999: 12).

In Namibia, the conservancy concept also emerged in the context of freehold farmland. Here, since 1968 and subject to certain conditions set by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) particularly with regard to fencing, European farmers have had legal rights to consumptively and otherwise utilise animal wildlife on their farms (Jones, 1995: 4). Under these circumstances landowners '…realised that it is advantageous to pool their land and financial resources to make available a larger unit on which integrated management practices can be carried out' (Jones, 1995: 4; see also Barnes and de Jager, 1995). In 1999, some 12 conservancies existed on freehold land, which, while acknowledged and supported by the MET, were without legal status (Jones, 1999b: 11).

Alongside this strengthening of wildlife access and management by settler farmers on freehold land, conservationists were voicing increasing concern regarding the future of animal-wildlife in Namibia's communally managed indigenous 'homelands'. A particular focus of this anxiety was the Kaokoveld of north-west Namibia, the imagined 'last wilderness' of South African environmentalists (Reardon, 1986; Hall-Martin *et al*., 1988; see critique by Bollig, 1998), and the world-famous birthplace of Namibian community-based conservation (see, for example, Jacobsohn, 1992). Here, large-scale losses in the

1970s and 1980s of internationally valuable large mammal species, particularly desert-dwelling elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) and black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*), provided an impetus to enlist local support for conservation (Owen-Smith, 1995). Initially, this was led by individuals spearheading a privately funded conservation charity the Namibian Wildlife Trust (NWT), including a co-director and project executant of a major facilitating NGO, IRDNC (Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation). The primary activity was the creation of a network of paid male 'community game guards' (CGGs, formerly auxiliary game guards), selected with the help of local headmen and oriented towards protecting the region's threatened large mammal species.

Following independence in 1990, the north-west Namibian CGG system was invoked by the then Ministry of Wildlife Conservation and Tourism (MWCT, now MET) and IRDNC in reworking the concept of conservancies for a 'conservancy policy' to include communal areas (MWCT, 1992; Jones, 1999c). The Nature Conservation Amendment Act of 1996 thus significantly alters the 1975 Nature Conservation Ordinance by devolving *proprietorship* over wildlife, and concessionary rights over commercial tourism incomes, to people on communal land (MET, 1995 a and b). I emphasise the term 'proprietorship' because, as elsewhere (see Neuman, 1997; Madzudzo, 1999; Matenga, 1999), the ultimate ownership of wildlife remains with the state (MET, n.d.: 9; The Namibian, 1999).

As with CBNRM programmes elsewhere in southern Africa, Namibia's 'conservancy policy' for communal areas has thus been developed as the basis for community-based conservation through devolved management of wildlife without moving people from the land (Nujoma, 1998). The conservancy policy enables communal area residents, as conservancy members, to benefit from, and have management responsibilities for, animal wildlife. To be registered as a wildlife management institution, a conservancy requires a defined boundary and membership, a representative management committee, a legal constitution and a plan for the equitable distribution of benefits (MET, 1995 a and b). In early 2004 there were 31 registered communal area conservancies with more than 50 involved with the registration process (Long *et al.*, 2004: xv). Like the much publicised Communal Area Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) initiative in Zimbabwe – the blueprint for other United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programmes throughout southern Africa – the assumption informing conservancy policy is that '…conservation and development

goals can be achieved by creating strong collective tenure over wildlife resources in communal lands' (Murombedzi, 1999: 288).

This 'new' conservation thus is driven by: acknowledgement of the costs experienced by farmers living alongside wildlife in these areas; a need to counter the alienating effects of past exclusionary conservation policies; realisation of the lack of economic incentives for local people to maintain a benign relationship to animal wildlife; and recognition of the economic development needs of rural populations. The primary 'facilitators' of CBNRM tend to NGOs with international donor-funding. In the Namibian case, a key player has been the NGO IRDNC which is considered by its donors, in this case the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), to have '…a particular onus…to facilitate conservancy registration and development' (Durbin *et al*., 1997: 5). The employment of male CGGs – for wildlife monitoring, policing and anti-poaching – continues to be an integral part of the running conservancies in Namibia's wildlife-rich communal areas. Conservancy establishment in communal areas thus remains '*…land acquisition for conservation* in the non-formal sense' (Jones, 1999a: 47, emphasis added), with a focus on effective protection and policing of an internationally valuable animal wildlife of large and dangerous mammals.

To clarify, modernity, in extremely simple terms, requires and builds on some key assumptions about the nature of reality. One of the most important and powerful of these is that 'the natural environment' is distinct – is separate – from culture and therefore from people. This nature–culture split has made possible a conceptual separation or alienation from environment, permitting objectification of 'the environment' and 'its resources'. As an object, 'the environment's' defining characteristics relate to the ways it is and can be viewed, used, measured, managed, governed, mapped, bounded and so on. As objects, 'the environment and its resources' can be commodified and thereby bought and sold, either for direct or indirect consumption. Those 'resources' that are less amenable to commodification – less able to generate value-added in the form of monetary profit – usually are less visible in environment and development initiatives, including CBNRM. CBNRM thus tends to focus on a spectacular and internationally valued animal wildlife over and above the multiple plants and invertebrates that constitute the dynamic fabric of engagement with the landscape for those who dwell there. Whilst pragmatic, such a tendency can close off possibilities for dialogue and conversation that might resonate with the realities of more of

those experiencing the constrained, and variously imposed, choices that CBNRM institutes (Sullivan, 1999). In terms of research, an objectified environment becomes amenable to the measurement tools of the environmental sciences, as well as to social science evaluation techniques such as resource economics and livelihoods analyses. These research and valuation practices tend to be those which are used in conceptualising and reviewing the costs and benefits of CBNRM schemes.

But this broad conceptual orientation produces inconsistencies and contradictions which are rarely, or at least not publicly, spoken about. Thus, biodiversity conservation remains firmly lodged within, and maintaining of, a commodification paradigm; surely ironically given that historically it is precisely the processes of commodification that have created many of the problems that environment and development initiatives seek to address. It seems strange, for example, that an approach rhetorically oriented towards environmental sustainability should advocate that a major way this is to be achieved is by selling consumptive experiences of 'the packaged environment' to wealthy outsiders, that is, those who are globally mobile and able to fly thousands of miles using just about the most environmentally polluting mode of transport there is at global levels (see, for example, Godoy, 2004) – not to mention the poor record that the petrochemical industry has regarding local and regional environments and human rights records, as well as its relationships with wars and conflict more generally.

A further paradox is the current practice of lobbying for, and receiving, immense monetary support for 'large-scale' biodiversity conservation efforts from 'big business'. Chapin (2004: 18) describes this as '… the partnering of conservationist organisations with multinational corporations – particularly in the businesses of gas and oil, pharmaceuticals and mining', and notes the links between these industries and the destruction of habitats, as well as the often marginalising implications for people living in such resource-rich areas. Business gains its own rewards from this practice, from tax-breaks, to accessing land and resources in collaboration with conservation organisations, to the veneer of 'green legitimacy' (or 'greenwash') attained by supporting conservation programmes. In a rather bizarre extension of this relationship, for example, the major ENGO the World Wide Fund for Nature International (WWF-Intern) rewards wealthy philanthropic businessmen with the organisation's 'Gift to the Earth Award' which celebrates contributions to 'conservation work', work which frequently involves a CBNRM

component even where it may focus on funding the purchase of land for conservation estate (see, for example, see Benjaminsen *et al*., 2005). What emerges is again a strange situation whereby individual capitalists who have reaped the substantial rewards of businesses in 'the south' – from diamond mining to tobacco production, and with the attendant environmental and social costs associated with these endeavours – subsequently are rewarded for their new-found efforts to save the planet. As Goodin (1994) suggests, this seems somehow analogous to the purchase by 'sinners' of 'indulgences' from the medieval church as a means of buying absolution from guilt and thereby ameliorating the time they otherwise would spend in purgatory (also see Connelly and Smith, 2003). In the alliance of business and biodiversity conservation, the incidence and consequences of environmental and social exploitation by business is shapeshifted into conservation legitimacy, even whilst once again (and the rhetoric notwithstanding) indigenous peoples – 'commoners' – frequently are sidestepped from 'the chance to design and run their own projects' (Chapin, 2004: 21).[11] Chapin (2004: 26) is rather brutal in his conclusion regarding these tendencies in making plain the obvious paradox that international conservation NGOs and donors actually '… are allying themselves with forces that are destroying the world's remaining ecosystems'.

At the same time, and despite the language of democratisation and rural empowerment accompanying donor-funded environment and development initiatives under neoliberalism, including CBNRM, many of the roles available to those inhabiting 'conservation areas' remain limited to becoming service-providers (or cultural objects) for a class of globally-mobile tourists, trophy hunters, environment and development professionals, and researchers, hailing to a large extent from the 'global north'. Alternative possibilities for self-determination, autonomy and 'development' thereby are constrained by broader structures that present few possibilities for serious equity and empowerment. It is of course preferable that people derive 'benefits' from the globally valuable biodiversity with which they dwell, instead of remaining legally alienated from

11 In a parody of awards such as WWF-Intern's 'Gift to the Earth Award', environmentalist campaigns also make their own awards to those they consider are abusing the possibilities of 'greenwash' to hide the real environmental effects of their business practices. Thus, 'CorpWatch gives out bimonthly Greenwash awards to corporations that put more money, time and energy into slick PR campaigns aimed at promoting their eco-friendly images, than they do to actually protecting the environment. Nominations for these Awards come from our audience' (CorpWatch, n.d.).

these 'resources' in a 'fortress conservation' of the colonial past. But a critical conceptualisation of these processes also might observe that biodiversity conservation effort, including community-based approaches, remains inseparable from a northern modernising discourse of neoliberal development, creeping inexorably (and silently) towards conformity and control through the funding of conservation and rural development programmes in 'the global south' (Escobar, 1996). Garland (1999: 93), for example, suggests that '… the *habitus*[12] of the Western liberal political field' has been extended to 'the south' through the 'ideological hegemony' of particular concepts of 'civil society', for which specific ideas of 'community' and governance' form an integral part. In the case of biodiversity conservation, support thus becomes available to 'communities' but only to the extent that they agree to construct themselves as 'suitable' custodians (managers) of internationally valued biodiversity, particularly animal-wildlife, and to provide the tourism and other services required by the global consumers of this wildlife (see Escobar, 1996: 57). At the same time, and further revealing of these contradictions, conservation organisations rarely ally themselves with the struggles of indigenous people for the power to *choose* and sustain different and perhaps autonomous landscapes and lifeworlds (see Chapin, 2004).

Speaking to these ironies, paradoxes and occlusions requires confronting the troublesome *incommensurability of values* that is absented and avoided by neoliberalism's construction and love of the seemingly benign face of the 'free' market. It means speaking of the uncomfortable messiness of affect and (be)longing in relation to lifeworlds and landscapes, in the hope that such words will not simply become more fuel for the commodification and measurement machine of *Empire* (Hardt and Negri, 2000). It perhaps produces gestures towards the possibility of '*[a] revaluation of all values*': making audible what otherwise are structurally necessary silences (Nietzsche, 1968 (1889): 24). As Hutton *et al*. (2005: 357) remark, '[s]cience is not the only way of understanding and appreciating nature. Even scientists respond to species and ecosystems in complex ways that stretch beyond the narrow dictates of their science'. The same comments might be made for economics and economists.

12 The term *habitus* is associated with the anthropologist and social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. He used it as a distillation of the ongoing but unspoken social practices engaged in by people of a shared culture and community, which become dynamically generative both of individual subjectivities and of collective identities and emergent structures (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1990 (1980)).

Consider, for example, the circumstances of people who have a contemporary history and tradition of hunting for food (see, for example, Marks, 1984). In the hunt, the process and act of hunting is not reducible to the consumption of meat at the end of it, although this, of course, is important. It also is about moving bodily through a landscape, which itself is the embodiment of multilayered meanings and sources of memory. A landscape of evocative sounds and smells; of plants that are known, used and familiar; of places associated with remembered historical events and ancestors; of autonomy and autarky (that is, self-sufficiency) in relation to procuring food; of a direct relationship with the animal – the sentient being – that is hunted; and of the enacting of a craft-hunting – comprising multifaceted expertise and skills at every stage of the process of procuring, taking the life of and preparing an animal as food and other usable items. It becomes:

> … a matter of kinds of knowledge which tend to be unspoken, whose rules do not easily lend themselves to being formally articulated or even spoken aloud. Nobody learns how to be a connoisseur or a diagnostician simply by applying the rules. With this kind of knowledge there are factors in play which cannot be measured – a whiff, a glance, an intuition. … The heritage … of hunters, of mariners, of women. It forms a tight link between the human animal and other animal species (Ginzburg, 1988, quoted in Plant, 1999: 88–89).

The receipt of a meat handout by a conservancy, as is a key component of conservancy benefits in the wildlife rich communal-area conservancies of Namibia, might satisfy a consumptive event, but cannot meet these other aspects that the *process* and experience of the hunt also satisfies. This suggests multiple reasons why people in Namibian communal-area conservancies are continuing to hunt, when legally this remains a criminal activity. Indeed, according to recent research (Long *et al*., 2004) hunting for local consumption (constructed as 'poaching' under a modern drive that consistently withdraws peoples' legitimate access to 'game' animals) remains widespread in Namibian conservancies. Further, frequently it is known about, and sometimes even perpetrated by, those charged with policing hunting activities within conservancy territories (that is, the local Community Game Guards, see Inset 1). Such practices seem counter to claims for CBNRM 'success' that require both a reduction or cessation of local hunting/poaching activities and affirmation of local support for extending the illegality of hunting under conservancy governance regimes.

Hunting and other practices *vis-à-vis* environment are also accompanied by stories, songs, humour and joy: by a rich symbolic, metaphorical and affirmative language of relationship and conceptualisation (for some examples for Damara/≠Nū Khoen people in north-west Namibia see Sullivan 1999, 2000, 2002, forthcoming). Thus, a wealth of landscape-embedded narratives, made globally available partly through anthropological work (and despite the modernist and patriarchal structuring that infuses much anthropology), speak of and affirm very different possibilities for people–environment inter-relationships (see Merchant, 1982 (1980); Bell, 1993 (1983); Bender, 1993; Narby, 1999 (1995); Ingold, 2000; Jensen, 2000; Brody, 2001). What these attempt to articulate is the conceptual possibility for both 'the environment' *and* human individual and social dynamics to be mutually constituted through processes of active, participative and affective relationships with landscapes and non-human species. The possibility that dwelling – that being at home in and with a landscape – might imply being *employed by*, rather than custodian of, localities and accompanying inhabitants; generating the further possibility of knowing nature as creative subject rather than managed object (see Mabey, 2006: 106–108).[13] Producing an ethics that 'classifies ecosystems as something from which humans cannot be subtracted rather than something that they own' (Vélez and Vélez, 2005: 109).

A significant question thus emerges: namely, can these sources of pleasure, meaning and mystery – these aspects of living that make it possible to be/become 'fully human' – be empowered by conservation and development trajectories that are oriented towards commodification, cash income, service provision, rights, governance and regulation? I would answer in the negative, since it seems to me that there is not much room for poetry – for joy, magic and contemplation – in the business (and busyness) of neoliberalism and the commodification of everything. This is to suggest that a more realistic (and honest) understanding of 'biodiversity conservation' within the frame of neoliberalism is required: as the fine-tuning of an existing *status quo* of inequality in the global and national distribution of capital; as a shifting of the costs of conservation onto communal area residents in line with neoliberal policies more generally; and as driven by a protectionist orientation to 'nature' as object,

13 This, of course, is a far and radical remove from a zeitgeist of our times – that of modernity's 20th century space-age desire to escape 'imprisonment of the earth' (and body) (as famously critiqued by Hannah Arendt, 1998 (1958): 1).

which privileges the epistemological and ontological assumptions of modernity, arguably reproducing the enclosing processes and dynamics that have created the problems of biodiversity loss and social exclusion that 'new' conservation seeks to address.

3. Sustainability?

'Stepping down' from these 'meta-level' considerations, and into the paradigm of 'sustainability' guiding contemporary biodiversity conservation, perhaps leads to some further disjunctures. The term 'sustainable' – and particularly its coupling with economic development in the term 'sustainable development' – has become a discursively exchangeable shibboleth (see Redford *et al*., 2006: 1) or catchword indicating much regarding the structure of the 'package' of contemporary conservation orthodoxy. Here I argue that as the key signifier and concept upon which the discourse and rationalities of neoliberal biodiversity conservation rests, 'sustainability' becomes both intrinsic to the maintenance of the particular and exclusionary one-way relationship guiding human→environment relationships discussed above; and constitutes a rhetorical economic and environmental ideal that rarely can be met in the terms with which it is articulated in environment and development 'project-speak'. In other words, it is possible to review and ask some questions of the sustainability of the sustainability discourse itself which guides contemporary biodiversity conservation – that is, using its own terms of reference and measures of success (see also Simpson, 2004). I do so here, again making reference to the Namibian CBNRM programme.

CBNRM generally is considered able to improve both livelihood and environmental sustainability, thereby producing a 'win-win' scenario for both rural economies and biodiversity resilience. The discourse goes something like this. Revenue from consumptive and non-consumptive uses of wildlife will enhance livelihoods by diversifying sources of income and thereby fostering economic development. And this will be both economically and ecologically sustained. Economically, because tourism, worldwide (and in Namibia), is a growth industry (Gaisford, 1997). And ecologically, because '[o]nce income is derived by local communities from the use of wildlife, they develop a vested interest in conserving game animals' (Jones, 1995: 9), whereby environmental degradation, framed as the erosion of biodiversity and habitat integrity, is reduced. CBNRM thus relies on an economising and commoditising

framework to justify projects and policy aimed at the 'sustainable use of natural resources' to meet both development and conservation objectives (for the emergence of this discourse in the Namibian context see Ashley and Garland, 1994; Ashley *et al*., 1994; Ashley, 1995, 1997; Callihan, 1999; Jones, 1999b following Murphree, 1993; Barnes *et al*., 2002). Clearly CBNRM initiatives are dynamic and unfolding phenomena. Nevertheless, a few issues and (in)consistencies can perhaps be highlighted, which suggest that in some ways, and in keeping with the discussion of incommensurable values above, the sustainability discourse driving and informing neoliberal biodiversity conservation practice may be 'hoisted by its own petard'[14]: exposed (and exploded) by its own narrative.

For example, it is unlikely that revenue from wildlife and/or tourism can constitute a particularly large source of income for all members of a 'community' at household and individual levels (Hackel, 1999). In the last few years incomes for communal area conservancies, and particularly wages from tourism-related activities, have risen substantially in Namibia (see, for example, Long *et al.*, 2004: xiv–xv). Nevertheless a number of observations are pertinent. First, *per capita* conservancy income, while growing in some cases, tends to be rather low. The highest payouts have been for Torra conservancy. This was one of the first Namibian conservancies to be established and as such has benefited from long-term facilitating assistance by the primary CBNRM initiating and implementing NGO, as well as from a particularly lucrative arrangement with a tourism lodge providing facilities to wealthy visitors to enjoy the spectacular wildlife and landscapes of north-west Namibia. It is the conservancy that is referred to repeatedly in the literature regarding southern African CBNRM as suggestive of the potential success (and sustainability) of CBNRM as an integrated biodiversity conservation and rural development strategy (see, for example, Nott *et al*., 2004). Here conservancy payouts to members consisted of a recent one-off payment of NS$630[15] per individual member (Long *et al*., 2004: xviii). Whilst clearly this makes a significant financial contribution to individual and household incomes, it remains low

14 This idiom means being 'harmed by one's own plan to harm someone else'; that is, 'to fall in one's own trap'. A petard is a medieval term for a small bomb used to blow up fortress walls and the like, and the idiom thus suggests being exploded by one's own bomb (Wikipedia, 2006c).

15 The current rate of exchange is Euro 1: Namibian $7.51361 (http://www.oanda.com/convert/classic visited 28 April 2006).

in real (and global) terms, and as a measure of income does not take into account the time, money and energy costs of conservancy establishment and running (on which more below), or indicate the more nuanced displacements effected in the appropriation of local land and human resources for external consumption.

Second, and as Callihan (1999: 10) states, most of the cash benefits received by members of communal area conservancies are '…in the form of employment income from tourism lodges and hunting contracts, or from an increased level of economic activity in the area…rather than as a result of the distribution of net conservancy income'. However, employment opportunities in the tourism sector remain limited. For example, in a recent survey of the wildlife- and conservancy-rich Kunene Region, only some 3.6 per cent of adults between 16 and 65 years listed CBNRM-related activities, including tourism, as their main occupation, and employees tended to be concentrated in families already distinguished by their relative wealth and educational attainments (Long *et al*., 2004: xvii).

Often CBNRM discourse goes further than simply arguing that incomes from wildlife and tourism can sustainably diversify and enhance livelihoods. For example, it has been suggested that returns on wildlife will encourage people to disinvest in other means of livelihood, particularly livestock and cultivation, thereby reducing the 'degrading' effects of these forms of land-use while sustaining incomes (for Namibian CBNRM, see Ashley, 1995, 1997; references in Powell, 1998: 121; Callihan, 1999). Thus for north-west Namibia, Hulme and Murphree (1999 after Jones 1999c), have suggested that '…the economic incentives created by devolving proprietorship over wildlife and tourism have led to people in this area re-evaluating the relative roles of wildlife and agriculture (domestic livestock and crops) in local development'. However, if per capita incomes from community-based wildlife and tourism initiatives remain low, and even without culturally informed desires relating to lifeworld choices with implications for subsistence and income-generating practices, it is unlikely that people will view wildlife as an alternative to their usual means of livelihood. Instead, it might be anticipated that people will direct income and decision-making power deriving from CBNRM-related activities towards enhancing and investing in sources of income and sustenance over which they have direct control and ownership (for example, livestock), and via which they are more likely to raise their individual material standards of living (as observed in Nabane, 1995; Jones, 1999b: 31; Murombedzi, 1999). Indeed, such practices would be fully in keeping with the otherwise

individualising and profit-maximising ideology of neoliberalism. Confusingly and conveniently, this seems to endorse and transmit a communalising rhetoric when interested in persuading the rural poor of the world to conserve resources of international value, while otherwise promoting privatisation and competition, particularly with regard to public utilities and global trade.

Further, while some communal areas of Namibia appear ideal for enhancing livelihood opportunities through capitalising on animal wildlife, favourable conditions are by no means evenly distributed. Kunene Region in north-west Namibia, for example, is characterised by diverse landscapes, a spectacular wildlife of large mammals, and relatively low human population densities. These constitute perfect conditions for the evolution of so-called '5-star conservancies' (Durbin *et al*., 1997; Jones, 1999b). Not surprisingly, therefore, this area has been a focus for NGO and donor support for the establishment of conservancies. Critique is particularly unwelcome in this context because these circumstances appear so ripe for 'success'. At the same time, widely publicised elaborations of success based on these situations present a rather unrealistic picture of the possibilities for the national conservancy policy structurally to improve livelihoods in the country's communal areas as a whole.

Also obscured by the rhetorics of empowerment, participation and livelihood diversification associated with CBNRM are concerns at national level to increase user-*accountability* for the costs of maintaining public sector services in remote and difficult environments. This is clear in the context of water provision for which a community-based system of water-point committees has been advocated: ostensibly as a means of empowering communal area farmers, but basically by encouraging their participation in funding and maintaining boreholes (Africare, 1993; Tarr, 1998). CBNRM similarly involves the shifting of costs and responsibilities for wildlife to local levels: in the policing of people's activities in relation to wildlife; in the funding of community institutions designed to manage wildlife and related revenues; and in the day-to-day experience of living with large and sometimes dangerous mammals. It has also been argued that revenue accruing to conservancies from wildlife could be mobilised to fund other sectoral developments such as school-building (see statements in Gaisford, 1997: 124). This implies a vision that, as well meeting their running costs as new wildlife management institutions, conservancies could carry the costs of public-sector development beyond biodiversity conservation.

Significantly, figures for the income that is or might be received from wildlife and tourism via conservancies also tend to make no provision for the costs involved in running conservancies. As Durbin *et al*. (1997: 17) state, however, the '…expectation is that conservancies, once financially viable, will take on the payment of the game guards, some of the staff and equipment such as vehicles and/or radios required to support them'. To date, these have been paid for by NGOs via the major donor-funded national CBNRM programme (LIFE). It is envisaged that the running costs of conservancies will be transferred to the new conservancy institutions as communities are able to 'wean' themselves off NGO support (Jones, 1999a: 300; see also Durbin *et al.*, 1997). It seems probable, however, that for the foreseeable future very little income will remain after the running costs of the conservancies have been covered. Logically this amounts to a situation whereby the conservancy finances the costs of conserving animal wildlife accessed and enjoyed by predominantly white conservationists, tourists and trophy-hunters, while receiving very little additional income for its efforts. The possible phasing-out of donor funding clearly raises significant questions regarding the 'sustainability' and, importantly, the development claims, of these conservation ventures, although as Barnes *et al*. (2002: 667) argue, a desirable aspect of conservancies in Namibia is that they 'provide a channel for the capture of international donors grants', capture which the national CBNRM programme presumably would wish to sustain.

The comments above iterate the observation that '[t]he immediate opportunity costs of conservation often exceed its more obvious, management-related costs and are largely borne by local communities', whilst 'the greatest benefits…are often widely dispersed and enjoyed in large part by wealthier national and global beneficiaries' (Balmford and Whitten, 2003: 238). Since these imbalances in costs and benefits emerge from market-oriented initiatives and instruments, however, I am reluctant to affirm that further pragmatic tweaking in these arenas (see, for example, Simpson, 2004) will be enough genuinely to produce the 'win-win' economic and environmental scenarios of sustainability imagined and desired by their architects. Sustainability in these contexts seems less about local empowerment and self-determination, or significant redistribution of resources, than about maintaining access to donor investment in the arena of biodiversity conservation, and access to biodiversity by consumers from elsewhere.

4. Concluding Remarks

Namibia was granted permission by international wildlife conservationists and government delegates to allow trophy hunting of five endangered black rhinos annually… The significance of the CITES[16] decision is that Namibia has received international recognition for its success in rhino conservation, brought about partly by Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) activities supported by USAID. The decision also reflects growing international recognition that in the developing world putting a market value on wildlife can actually help to conserve it (USAID Namibia, 2005).

> Nature is a language, can't you read? (The Smiths, 1986).

'Biodiversity' is constructed as an object both when nature is set aside in national parks and when community-based and other conservation initiatives focus on increasing the money to be made from viewing and consuming the objects of nature. Custodial rights are discursively located in distant decision-makers – those inhabiting a global community of donors, environment and development professionals, scientists, project managers etc. – even when conservation initiatives speak in terms of local empowerment, decentralisation and choice. So, to return to the opening of this piece, I iterate that I genuinely do not know whether to celebrate the 'new' conservation of CBNRM for its pragmatic achievements in participating and producing a neoliberal value-frame for 'biodiversity conservation'. Or to critique it for upholding a global situation of structural inequality, and participating in a globalising project that fetishises[17] commodification, whilst simultaneously desacralising the affective possibility pregnant in all spheres of relationship.

The overriding issue, of course, is that 'natural resources' with conservation and other values (for example, I am thinking here of minerals and petrochemicals) frequently occur in low-income countries but are desired by those in high-income countries. Nevertheless, neoliberal approaches to conservation, including CBNRM,

16 The United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

17 I use the term 'fetish' in a Marxist sense, to refer to the mystique with which commodities and also concepts can become imbued, giving rise to their desire and reification, and their consequent impregnability as 'things' that implicitly structure social relationships (see Wikipedia, 2006d): Namibian $7.51361 (http://www.oanda.com/convert/classic visited 28 April 2006).

expect a structurally entrenched poor to protect biodiversity and ecosystems *and* increasingly to shoulder the costs of providing these services, whilst devaluing alternative and incommensurable value-frames. At the same time, and as noted above, the primary beneficiaries and consumers of wildlife appear to be those from high-income countries and contexts – development and conservation professionals, tourism and trophy hunting businesses and consumers, researchers, etc. (see Sullivan, 2002; Balmford and Whitten, 2003; Simpson, 2004). In the past I have suggested that 'sustainability' in *in situ* wildlife/biodiversity conservation might be attainable in the longer term only if accompanied by a substantive 'consumer pays' approach: amounting to economically realistic and long-term payments directly to those dwelling in desired landscapes in return for the manipulation of land use and livelihoods required to satisfy national and global conservation desires (Sullivan, 2002; see also Simpson and Sedjo, 1996; Simpson, 2004). Of course, such an approach again (re)produces the value-frames I attempt to critique in this piece. The intent, then, was to highlight the possibility of moving away from initiatives that subsidise alternative means of benefiting from biodiversity; and via which only small financial benefits accrue to those conserving resources, even though large sums of money are clearly available both for, and from, wildlife conservation endeavours.

Here I grope towards the possibility of a shift in discourse and practice from protection and conservation, to relationship and conversation. From producing a transcendent nature to be viewed and consumed from beyond the conceptual barriers effected by modernity's enclosures regarding people-environment relationships; to being in dynamically immanent relationship with the beings/becomings comprising 'biodiversity'. Raising these questions might be considered romantic and idealistic, redolent of a foolish nostalgia that is immaturely resentful of the 'grown-up' pragmatic worlds of global environmental management and economic instrumentalism. But *not* to speak of these exclusions is to collude with them, and thus to reproduce the cynical dynamics contributing to disrespectful relationships with both 'biodiversity' and with people who tend to be excluded, historically and today, by biodiversity conservation discourses and their sedimenting into implementing modern institutions. Kuper (2003) argues that such a romanticism, and a delineating of 'indigenous peoples' and affective relationships with 'the environment' more generally, effects a 'return of the native' in anthropology – that is, echoing the characterisations used by the

discipline and the modern powers it served to denote the 'other', conveniently understood as primitive, backward and savage and in need of civilisation through colonisation. Today, labels and categories such as 'indigenous people' also become a means whereby people can play the games of identity politics, with winners and losers created by the ability or otherwise to assume the labels valued by the discourses sanctioned by modernity (see Sullivan, 2001). In a sense, however, there is a risk here of throwing the baby out with the bathwater; of implying that a concept such as 'indigenous', and the affective and shamanic relationships with the non-human world that might be implied by this term, can be understood only within a modern frame that devalues (unless it can commodify) all that is associated with this label. This becomes a further participation in an inability to witness or listen to the experiential differences and alternatives of which 'being/becoming indigene' might speak. It produces, in other words, another means of silencing 'the other' (see Sullivan, 2005b). Instead, I suggest that these observations are more *realistic* than romantic: since they derive from witnessing peoples' despair and depression (as well as subjectively experiencing a fair amount of my own) over the inability of pragmatic development and governance bodies to converse with these qualitative, affective and empirical (that is, sensed and experienced) concerns and desires.

This article does not attempt to provide 'an answer' to the questions raised herein regarding the utility of contemporary market-based approaches to biodiversity conservation under neoliberalism. Following Arendt (1998 (1958): 5), it is an attempt 'to think what we are doing', in acknowledgement that the eco-modernisation discourse – which would shoe-horn all people–environment values into technocratic, measured and economic solutions – is not hermetically sealed or universally accepted. It is a gesture towards changing the parameters of the conversation regarding 'conservation'; and an iteration of different possibilities for relationships with each other and the non-human world.

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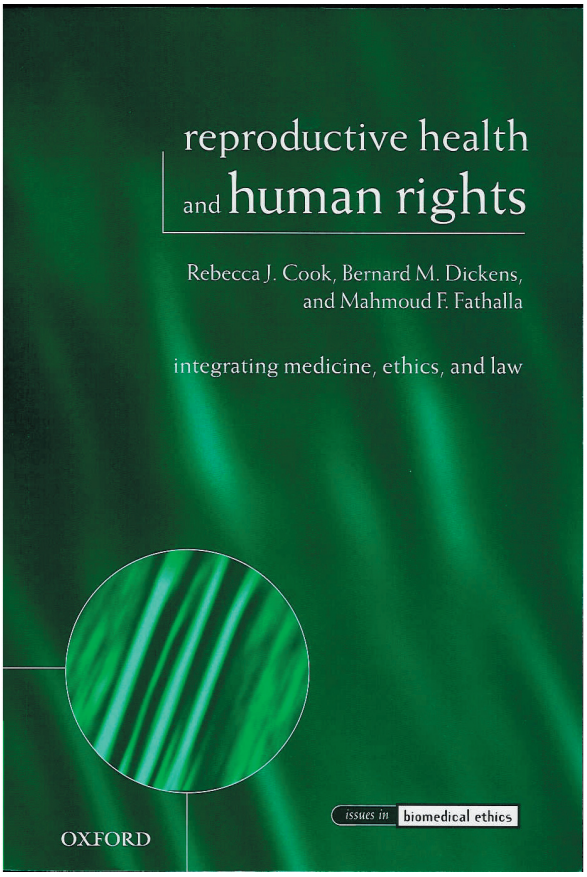

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