

Conservation and land in Namibia: A palimpsestic reading of an underexplored nexus

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INTRODUCTION

This special issue set out to capture the many and varied ways in which conservation relates to land in Namibia; accordingly, we opted for expanse over precision in our thematic framing. Not only did an expansive scope make sense thematically but it also closely aligns with the Namibian Journal of Environment's (NJE) own mandate - making the NJE a logical home for this epistemological pursuit.

NAMIBIA'S CONSERVATION–LAND NEXUS

While scholarship on conservation and land in Namibia, as separate research domains, is abundant and diverse, we believe that not enough scholarly attention has been dedicated to the nexus where conservation and land co-produce plurality. This includes research that considers both conservation and land in their broadest sense and considers conservation as an 'inscribing' force or land governance structure, rather than merely a land preservation concept and practice - including cases where conservation is mobilised in ways that reconfigure land use (Lindsey et al. 2013). A lot has been written about Namibia's communal conservancy-based approach to natural resource management (e.g., Naidoo et al. 2011; Humavindu & Stage 2015; Nuulimba & Taylor 2015; Riehl et al. 2015; Lendelvo et al. 2020; Heffernan 2022; Foyet 2024), but even there, scholarship has tended to

focus on conservation and socio-economic outcomes - with a few exceptions (e.g., Gargallo 2015; Bollig 2016; Odendaal & Werner 2020; Koot et al. 2023; Kadhikwa et al. 2026). These exceptions have typically occupied realms of political ecology. This has left abundant room for exploration in perhaps more abstract, nuanced and relational spaces (e.g., Dieckmann 2023). With long histories of land dispossession, as well as evolving land governance systems, land use dynamics and ambitions to rectify land injustices, Namibia presents an intriguing subject for inquiry. What role conservation has played or plays in these processes has been scantily documented - something that has become clear during our collective works (Becker 2022; Becker & Holmes 2026; Lenggenhager 2018; Lenggenhager et al. 2021; Moore & Lenggenhager 2025). That is why, when we published the call for this issue, we placed particular emphasis on these aspects.

As a contrast, it is worth casting our eyes beyond Namibia's borders. Research in and on South Africa, for example, has been grappling more comprehensively with the conservation–land nexus, with inquiries ranging from conservation's influence on land inequality (Lenggenhager & Ramutsindela 2021; Spierenburg 2020; Thakholi & Büscher 2024; Thakholi & Koot 2023), to how conservation intersects with land reform efforts (Ramutsindela 2003; Shwababa et al. 2025). These

references are merely illustrative though; the conservation–land nexus continues to generate a vast and expanding body of scholarship.

Our call attracted abstracts from across the breadth and depth of the conservation–land nexus. We ended up receiving 15 abstracts, of which 12 were accepted and culminated in the submission of a full manuscript. However, following peer-review and given our prescribed timeframe, our collection was ultimately reduced to six papers. Whether accepted or rejected, the submitted materials revealed the broad spectrum on which both conservation and land are or can be conceptualised, whether in isolation or in relational terms.

INSIDE A PALIMPSEST

Sullivan and Ganuses (this issue) follow three individual journeys in north-western Namibia, as they traverse landscapes through an ancestral lens, and situate this experience within conservation’s historical influence, which has rendered certain cultural heritage largely invisible. This storytelling is also entangled with the history of Etosha National Park, across its many iterations. The consequences of its establishment and consolidation have been well-documented from a human displacement perspective. Hundreds of people were infamously evicted and displaced with the Park’s commercialisation and physical enclosure (e.g., Dieckmann 2001, 2023; Koot & Hitchcock 2019; Odendaal 2024). In this issue, Wahedi and Koot visit one of the sites of this consequence - Tsintsabis. Tsintsabis is a farm-turned-settlement, which was acquired by the State as part of its group resettlement programme. Here, the authors investigate the contemporary challenges of a resettled San community, while also attempting to trace an enduring interrelatedness between culture, environment, land and people. Further east, in Nyae Nyae, Hitchcock and Kelly (this issue) take a closer look at a people who were largely spared the expropriation of their ancestral lands. Now, with Namibia’s post-independence conservation model on communal land, they are navigating dynamic and evolving governance systems, in an attempt to preserve a deeply anchored connection to their ancestral land. Similarly, David et al. (this issue) detail the potential for and the value of generationally derived tacit knowledge in governing contemporary Namibia’s

state forest reserves. To do this, the authors draw from their experiences engaging communities who live in and around three different state forest reserves in Namibia’s Kavango West, Otjozondjupa and Zambezi regions. As a concluding perspective, Naanda et al. (this issue) outline the potential of other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) in Namibia. OECMs were conceptualised through a Convention on Biological Diversity decision in 2018 and are territories outside of formal protected areas that are recognised as contributing positively to global conservation outcomes. Their implementation in Namibia at this stage is still in a pilot phase, which is prioritising private game reserves and privately led initiatives at large. Their wider implementation would signal a more systematic alignment with global conservation governance and targets, and another conservation-motivated addition to the palimpsest that is Namibian land.

As this special issue took shape, aligning its contents with the figure of a palimpsest became increasingly apt. Despite a relatively modest number of contributions, this collection takes us through varied writing and rewriting processes, where we consider land a parchment, on which conservation, in its many forms, has inscriptive agency. From historicising this dynamic to imagining its future, the included works demonstrate expertly to what extent the conservation–land nexus in Namibia has been layered, inscribed and obscured. Simultaneously, the contributed works have exposed the unfilled spaces left behind.

BIASES, GAPS AND POTENTIAL FOR MORE

The special issue inherited disciplinary biases that have perhaps, so far, also defined Namibia’s conservation–land nexus. Anthropology, for example, has played a significant role. Its methodological toolkit has undoubtedly equipped it well to tease apart some of the nuances that are often definitive of conservation and land’s interrelation. However, the existing corpus would certainly benefit from a greater diversity in disciplinarity. And while a few abstracts met this criterion, they ended up either falling outside of the scope of this special issue or their full submissions required more work. Where the latter applied, we offered everyone the opportunity to transfer their

submission to one of the NJE's general issues. We are therefore looking forward to more.

A thematic gap, which persists in this issue, is how freehold, and specifically private, farmland is evolving as a consequence of conservation-narrated development. While Naanda et al. (this issue) do expand on a developing dimension within this context, what rural Namibia's move towards a more wildlife-centric economy has meant for freehold agricultural land and its many facets is severely lacking intersectional inquiry.

With the identification of gaps and the acknowledgement of biases, it is also worth reflecting on our own position as editors. We were trained in different disciplines and intellectual environments (ecology, anthropology and history), which has equally resulted in biases and preferences in how we perceive and analyse the conservation-land nexus. These, of course, have also been informed by our personal journeys. As contrasting and varied as our backgrounds, experiences and values may be, we have found considerable alignment inside the conservation-land nexus. This alignment ultimately gave rise to the idea for a special issue call. We hope that this issue is not only insightful but can serve as a launchpad for further discussion and inquiry.

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