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Anthropological Perspectives of Transboundary Park Impact: People of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, Southern Africa

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This paper explores the politics behind the creation of a trinational park and the people it affects in the creation process. Rather than look solely at the various and very important environmental impacts a park such as this creates, this paper focuses mainly on trinational park creation, the reasons for doing so, and its effects on the local, rural, poor, and indigenous populations living within and around park boundaries. Historically, the majority of native populations within and around parks have been disenfranchised, disempowered, dislocated, and relocated to lands on the edge of park boundaries or entirely outside of parkland to areas that are less-appealing and have less-productive soils. As in the United States, this takes place in countries around the world, if not more so. Such is the case in Africa. But like the United States, parks in other countries are transforming, and in the process they are trying to incorporate native peoples back into the conservation, sustainable development, and management of parks.

In this particular examination three very important processes happening simultaneously at one park in Southern Africa are described. First, the paper explores the creation of a trinational, triboundary park through the removal of fences to create vast, open, and undefined wilderness habitat for wildlife and tourism. Second, it examines the how and why the park was created and the problems associated with taking on such an endeavor. And third, the effects all this has on that "other" population, the humans, and what they are doing about it. As a park ranger in a past life, I find the evolution of single parks to multicountry managed parks extremely exciting and fascinating, especially for the positive benefits it provides for wildlife. But from an anthropological perspective, which is the one taken here, local people, their habitat, and their empowerment is important and should be incorporated into park conservation, development, and management. The research for this paper was not collected in Africa, although I would like to go there in the future. This paper and the presentation based on it that was given at the GWS 2005 conference is hopefully a precursor to that goal.

National parks such as the ones first created in the United States have been emulated and copied throughout the world (Reid 2001). But national parks are evolving from singular political state boundaries into multistate managed parklands. The growing trend of combining neighboring countries' national parks with surrounding communal, reserve, and state park land signifies an exceptional development: the creation of transboundary reserves. The idea of international transboundary protected areas was first introduced in the 1920s and 1930s, but has only come to fruition within the last few decades (Wright 2001). The first attempt at creating a transfrontier protected area took place in 1924 when Czechoslovakia and Poland tried to solve a boundary dispute at the end of World War I, an effort which ultimately failed (UNESCO 2002). The first successful transboundary park to be established was in 1931, linking Glacier National Park in the United States to Canada's Waterton Lakes

National Park (Wright 2001). Referred to also as "transfrontier parks," "binational parks," "trinational parks," and "super parks," these connecting, unfenced parks preserve and nurture whole bioregions rather than just ecosystems. The World Bank estimates that 10% of the world's total protected area network is composed of transfrontier complexes, including 400 protected areas within 98 countries (MacKinnon 2000). Following the World Conservation Union's (IUCN's) 1988 report and guidelines, at least 70 protected areas that straddle national boundaries in 65 countries have been identified as probable transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) (PPF 2003b). In 1996, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Communist bloc, changing geopolitical climates have allowed for acceleration of transboundary initiatives, producing more than 100 pairs of transboundary parks in more than 65 countries (UNESCO 2002).

The park that is examined here is the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park that connects Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe (Figure 1). I chose this park because as an anthropologist my particular specialization is in Southern Africa and because, once created,

the Great Limpopo will be the largest park in Africa and the largest transborder park in the world. Furthermore, fences are being removed along the borders of the three countries to increase and connect wildlife preserves to allow animals (including rare, threatened, and "exotic" animals) to be able to roam freely over their naturally large territories without constraint. Attention is generally given to the large game animals, better known as the "big five" (lion, leopard, elephant, rhino, buffalo), because of their historical significance as hunting trophies (Carruthers 1995). The dropping of fences increases the health of individual animals and herds by increasing genetic diversity

Figure 1. Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area.

within populations (that may have not had access to one another) and a general increase in habitat, food resources, and shelter (UNESCO 2002). Besides obvious conservation preservation, the park intends to serve as one of the major, if not the major, revenue producers in the area. Since environmental tourism is on the rise around the world, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and South Africa plan to profit on the phenomenon. Tourism will affect not only the park but all areas and businesses around it, including but not limited to hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, safari operations and sightseeing tours in general, and legal hunting excavations (which still exist and provide a lot of money). This quote sums up the idea well:

> It is intended that the core GKG Transfrontier Park [referring to the three main areas to be incorporated into the park; see below] will be connected to a hinterland of private, resettlement and communal lands, creating the wider GKG TFCA. This will allow the spread of benefits to reach a much wider community than would otherwise be the case. It would also allow the whole lowveld wildlife/tourism community to piggy-back onto the momentum stimulated by the creation of the TFCA (which is one of the most important motivations for creation of the TFCA) (Wild-Net Africa 2001:3–4).

One of the most important reasons for the creation of the park is to attain political peace between the three countries through unification. One name for the park—"Peace park"—is particularly relevant. Creating the Great Limpopo Park is an opportunity to find ways to join the efforts of environmental conservation and preservation with community development between three countries that historically were very troubled and until recently have had significant upheaval and turmoil (which continue in Zimbabwe) and civil war. It's a symbolic joining between countries in Southern Africa to create one of the largest parks in the world promoting conservation, stability, and peace. But one of the main challenges to do this, since people live in and around the parkland, is how to integrate these local communities into conservation practices while understanding, facilitating, and promoting their needs.

The super park's composition contains national parks, reserves, sanctuaries, communal land, and private land designated within the three countries of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Duffy 1997; Wolmer 2003). Specifically, the largest and main areas of incorporation are Mozambique's Gaza Province (also called Coutada 16), South Africa's Kruger National Park, and Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park. Banhine Park and Zinave Park in Mozambique are other parks marked for inclusion. Communal lands such as the Sengwe area in Zimbabwe to the Makuleke region in South Africa are included. Reserves such as the Manjinji Pan Sanctuary and the Malpati Safari Area in Zimbabwe will be annexed (GLTP 2003a; WildNet Africa 2001). Other areas around these lands are being incorporated into the transnational park while new areas are constantly being evaluated and considered for their inclusion (Duffy 1997). Idealized future plans for the park eventually have its boundaries reach across the entire country of Mozambique (GLTP 2003a).

Originally the three main parks within Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe produced the name GKG Transfrontier Park (Gaza–Kruger–Gonarezhou). Sometimes the name GKG TFCA (transfrontier conservation area) is used, as in the quote above. The unbiased and neutral name of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park was later adopted so as not to favor one country over another (Clark 2001; PPF 2003a). "Limpopo" comes from the name of one of the major rivers that runs through the center of the park from west to east between the borders of Zimbabwe and South Africa, through Mozambique where it empties into the Indian Ocean. The total surface area of the transfrontier park is approximately 35,000 sq km. Planned annexation of other wildlife areas surrounding the super park would bring the surface area to a grand total of 99,800 sq km (GLTP 2003a).

Other major rivers that flow through the greater Limpopo Park are the Save, Olifants, and Komati (PPF 2003a; Wild Net Africa 2001). The Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park consists mainly of four landscape types—a lowland plain, granite plateau, mountain range, and river valleys—and is in general very dry. The park is essentially a flat savanna broken by the Lebombo mountain range that runs north to south with minimal rainfall even during the summer's rainy season and mild temperatures year round. Vegetation types range from montane woodland and shrubveld, mixed bushveld, sandveld, to riverine woodland (GLTP 2003a). "Only a few areas within the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park have been intensively surveyed for biodiversity attributes" (GLTP 2003a:3–4). Nonsurveyed TFCA areas in Zimbabwe should see increasing wildlife abundance as fences between borders drop.

One hundred and forty seven species exist within the TFCA, including a significant

population of large mammals such as lions, spotted hyenas, elephants, Burchell's zebra, hippos, giraffes, warthogs, buffaloes, kudu, waterbuck, blue wildebeest, and impala. Several types of birds, reptiles, fish, amphibians, and plants are abundant. The super park also holds several endangered animals such as the rhino (both black and white), wild dog, Juliana's golden mole, eptesicus bat, roan antelope, sable, and the tsessebe (GLTP 2003b). More than 6,000 wild animals and 1,000 elephants will be relocated to the Limpopo Park from Kruger National Park at the completion of the TFCA. Already dozens of elephants from Kruger have been placed within Mozambique (PPF 2001).

There are many different human communities within and around the park. They are mainly composed of groups of Bantu origin: Africans speaking languages descended from the same linguistic phylum of the people who displaced the original San hunter-gatherers 800 years ago (Azevedo 1991; PPF 2003b). Many of these people live a life based on animal, totemic and ancestor spirit religions, such as the Shona in the north of the park to the Makuleke in the south. Currently, dislocation of local, poor, and native peoples proves to be a continuing consequence for the creation of the park, even though native voices were originally promised to be heard and incorporated into park management. This has not been the case. In fact, over 6,000 people are currently being relocated to lands outside of park boundaries (Refugee Research Programme 2002; Seria 2002).

Initiatives behind conservation efforts around parks and within communal land programs sound good on paper but in reality these efforts have negative outcomes and consequences for local people. Intentions of the conservation effort are admirable. Nevertheless, the failure to address human needs within this framework is serious. Additionally, the policy creators who put conservation efforts in place often fail to understand the local population's viewpoint. Parks such as these take ecological considerations into account first, leaving human populations as an afterthought most of the time.

Another problematic point in the creation of parks intended for worthy conservation issues is that these parks are in many cases created according to a racist, Western, white viewpoint. The importance of "nature" forces deprivation of resources by the local population. Conflict between the countries over money allocation is also a major problem. This is a major cause for concern since South Africa is arguing for most of the funds produced by the transfrontier park since it is based off of the flagship Kruger National Park (Mail and Guardian 2003). Additionally, border crossing is still a problem that needs to be worked out, including whether to issue passports and visas. Because of issues like these the park is currently not up and running. One of the main problems comes from Zimbabwe, with its recent political upheaval and its distrust in joining the transborder park initiative. Additionally, land mines found in Zimbabwe's part of the park have prevented that country from joining the TFCA so far (Maravanyika 2003). Wildlife poaching is still a major problem, while disagreement over the disbursement of hunting licenses has management taking conflicting sides. Of all the TFCA park management issues, the proper training of wildlife managers (the equivalent of park rangers in the U.S.) has come to be the most serious problem facing park enforcement, regulation, and operation (AllAfrica 2003). To make the park possible, logistical problems and money allocation must be figured out. Zimbabwe must settle its dispute in joining the park and clear its landmines since it is the major factor stopping the progress of

park creation. If it cannot, it may be left out of the initiative, for now. Various problems beyond training for wildlife managers for proper park implementation exist, too many to discuss here. Exploring just the implementation of such a grand park or the various reasons why Zimbabwe has not joined the TFCA as of yet are papers in themselves.

To resolve many of these conflicts requires patience, finesse, and examples to draw from if available. The design and implementation of projects that help surrounding park communities use the land efficiently to promote environmental conservation, while including cultural and economic viability in the equation, are needed. Such an example comes from one of the native communities within the park, the Makuleke. The Makuleke own a lodge within park boundaries. The Makuleke own and profit from all concessions in the park since they own the land. But the land is still guaranteed conservation status and is protected and operated under full park status. This joint venture between the Makuleke community and SANP (South African National Parks, which currently runs Kruger National Park where the Makuleke's land exists) is considered a contractual park (Carruthers 1995; Reid 2001; Poonan 2002). The argument made here is that if the Makuleke example is followed, local communities, not just wildlife and visitors, can benefit from the park. Local communities and visitors may interact with and prosper from one another. Community involvement is achieved, visitors' cultural knowledge is expanded, wildlife is protected, and the land's current conservation status stays part of the park system. It will be interesting to see how the Makuleke's contractual park with SANP will change to integrate into new transfrontier park once established. Hopefully the process will be a smooth one with few conflicts, with the result ultimately to the benefit of the Makuleke. If the Makuleke transition is positive, other peoples within the Great Limpopo transfrontier area may want to follow their example. If the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park allows local land policy such as this to advance, rural, poor, and indigenous people within and around parks have a chance for increased empowerment. Once this is achieved, parks and their people around the world can follow the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park example.

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