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Transfrontier Conservation areas: A new dawn for eco-tourism, or a new form of conservation expansionism.

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Imagine a continuous mass of land, in which wildlife freely roam, and one is able to travel from the Northern tips of the Kruger National Park to the Northern parts of the Zambezi and perhaps even further, and Southwards and Eastwards towards the borders of Maputo. One has the pleasure of uninterrupted travel with no border posts, and splendid viewing with the richness of flora and fauna that nature offers. This is the vision that is being set out by the recent announcements of the formation of the two Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs), namely the Kalahari Gemsbok Park (Kalagadi), and the joining of the Northern part of the Kruger with parks in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. TFCAs are defined as relatively large areas which straddle frontiers between two or more countries and cover large-scale natural systems encompassing one or more protected areas, with possible expansion by the purchase of new land. While TFCAs may entail more than just protected areas, the emphasis is to create cross-border parks driven almost by a evangelical zeal in which other land-use options are excluded from discussion.

The formation of TFCAs is not new, and one of the first TFCAs formed was the Glacier-Waterton International Park in 1932, involving Canada and the USA. Since then, TFCAs have been created in other countries such as Latin America and Asia. TFCAs hold great potential for both conservation and economic development in the Southern African region, where about 630 000 km^2 of land is under conservation protection, constituting about 11% of the region’s land mass. However, creating TFCAs beg the following questions: Are we putting our money to best use? If so, are we sure that the benefits from TFCAs in terms of direct economic returns would have the desired socio-economic impacts the proponents would like to claim? Should cost recovery not be an integral component of TFCAs?

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the continued perception that TFCAs are for the benefit of the rich. Such conflicts are already evident with regards to the San land-claim in the Kalagadi where disputes abound over potential benefits to communities. The irony perhaps is that TFCAs may have greater benefits to the global community by expanding the protection of biodiversity -one of our key global commons while on the ground local communities and national governments will have to carry the cost for foreign visitors.

Others would argue that perhaps what is needed most in the region is less emphasis on TFCAs and more on transboundary natural resource management which would contribute to greater regional peace and sustainable use of the region’s valuable natural resources. The line of argument presented is that the foundation of peace in the region in the next 30 years will not be through TFCAs, but by averting wars and conflicts over water and land for which very little resources are dedicated if one considers the amount of money and effort that is already going into the construction of TFCA projects. This is in light of the fact that TFCAs still carry the baggage of old conservation values. There is a real danger that if TFCAs are not carefully thought through in terms of their economic and social impacts, a purely conservation mind-set may drag regional governments to support what may turn out to be large tracts of unproductive land that would be nothing more than ‘white elephants’, the cost of which will have to be borne by already impoverished citizens in the region. There simply needs to be more discussion on the potential benefits of TFCAs and whether these are the only creative conservation options and models that are available to us.

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It would seem that tough economic questions and analyses have taken the back-seat for high-powered lobbying and romantic images that TFCAs lend themselves too. This is not to say that some areas should not be declared transfrontier areas, as any other trade-off would entail far more costs in the future even though immediate benefits may sound alluring if conservation as an option was waivered.

TFCA initiatives admittedly do create potential benefits in the form of contributing to the maintenance of key ecological functions, sharing management expertise and capacity given that these are limited, better enforcement against poaching, less border and customs complexities, and benefits created through eco-tourism and other types of entrepreneurial ventures. Some proponents, like the Peace Park Foundation, argue that TFCAs would enhance regional peace. This proposition needs to be tested against a background where land, mineral and water disputes still continue to dominate the ethos of the regional politics. Perhaps a more realistic assertion is that TFCAs may not only contribute to peace, but possibly to conflicts as well, if land disputes and economic benefits are not shared equitably between different participating countries.

The downside of TFCAs may perhaps lie with the transaction costs, given the time it takes to establish an agreement and get all the ducks in a row. The Kalagadi, for instance, took 50 years to get off the ground. There are costs involved in developing a common management system, training, fencing, dealing with community conflicts and development issues, and raising investment capital for developing different entreprenuerial activities for which there are market opportunities but which still need to be translated into reality. If the process in setting up a TFCA takes too long, investors may become impatient and decide to spend their money elsewhere. Presently, while protocols have been signed and heads of States have corked the champagne bottles, investment in these areas still need to be seen.

TFCAs are therefore not just a conservation issue, given the scale and requirements of an injection of large sums of money that are already scarce in the region. One must be sure that by investing today, not only should costs be recovered, but reasonable returns to both local and national economies must ensue. Facts and figures on the costs and benefits involved are hard to come by, as no accurate figures exist as to the cost for running such protected areas and whether commercialisation through eco-tourism ventures will lead to the realization of returns promised by conservationists. In the last two years or so, the near collapse of the Conservation Corporation, the largest private sector investor in eco-tourism ventures, demonstrated how fickle the eco-tourism market is. Moreover, with the Zimbabwean crisis, nature-based tourism has taken a ‘nose-dive’ since the Southern African region is seen as a whole rather than constituting different independent States. Relying totally on eco-tourism and even attracting investors to venture their capital in this direction is considered a fairly risky business.

Recently, experiences with eco-tourism suggest that if money is to be made, then the diversification of initiatives either through multiple land-use or different conservation-based enterprises are more likely to lead to success than single options. Eco-tourism also tends to show considerable higher ‘leakage’ of revenue from local areas, and creates more benefits for private and public sector enterprises outside of TFCAs. The net contribution to national or local economies is still a vague area of analysis in terms of revenue capture, as well as the number of jobs created out of every dollar that is invested. Currently, work done by the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the World Bank suggest that leakage can range anywhere between 40-70% of net income depending on which country is involved. This raises concerns about equity and if governments are to invest significant resources, in what way can they ensure that their GDP figures in the long-term are boosted by these investments? Presently, the jury is out on this question.

While the debate around the flow of benefits has revolved generally around local communities, little attention has been placed on macro-economic impacts. Such macro-economic impacts include opportunity costs for locking land into a particular land-use type when perhaps both in the short and long-term other land-use options may generate more income and jobs than conservation. Presently, finances to keep up with recurrent costs for managing land are not available, and vary from country to country in the Southern African region. In 1999, a USAID commissioned study estimated that recurrent expenditure for conservation is in the range of $200/km^2/year. This analysis of cost compared to income generated or the level of support from regional governments for a sample of protected areas shows that some protected areas in the region are not economically viable or sustainable at all, whilst others, such as the Kruger National Park, show better returns per hectare than when compared against agriculture or other land-use activities. It would therefore be more appropriate to suggest that TFCAs should be considered on a strict cost/benefit analysis, where those areas which have a greater chance of being viable under eco-tourism should receive the highest level of protection, whilst those areas which are not as competitively strong be considered in a mix of land-use options ensuring maximum benefits are realised from the land. To reduce the financial burden, it may be prudent to release some land for the purposes of agriculture if it has no obvious conservation value, or is unlikely to attract tourism due to remoteness or other factors.

Grassroot activists are concerned about the rights of local communities and their ability to access natural resources within fenced-off TFCAs for maintaining acceptable levels of livelihood. If this issue is not dealt with adequately it is likely to lead to more conflict and