

Moving People, Moving Boundaries

The Socio-economic Effects of Protectionist Conservation, Involuntary Resettlement and Tenure Insecurity on the Edge of Mt. Elgon National Park, Uganda¹

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen a global proliferation of protected areas. A philosophy of exclusionary protectionism, which began with the creation of the US National Parks system, has remained central to many of these conservation initiatives. Though well-intentioned such practices have had severe repercussions for the livelihoods of rural communities worldwide. Focusing on the history and nature of conflict between rural communities and park managers on the northern edge of Mt. Elgon National Park, Uganda, this paper briefly examines the historical development of the protectionist conservation paradigm and some of the effects this approach has had on rural environments and livelihoods. This paper also presents preliminary findings that suggest that protectionist park policies have fostered land tenure insecurity over the past three decades which has exacerbated poverty and conflict. Such tenure seems also to have led to environmental degradation in the forms of soil loss, water siltation, and increased in-park resource use.

Keywords: involuntary resettlement, conflict, tenure insecurity, poverty, Mt. Elgon, Uganda

Introduction

The past three decades have marked a global expansion of protected areas. In Africa, the growth of protected areas has been particularly acute; Green and Paine (1997) estimate that the area of land under legal protection has increased thirteen-fold since 1970. Central to the establishment of many of these new protected areas has been a philosophy of protectionism, under which all human use of protected resources is prohibited (Borgerhoff Mulder and Coppolillo 2005; Chatty and Colchester 2002). Such strict protectionism has often been coupled with the wholesale displacement of vast numbers of people who depended on those resources now fenced-off behind the hard boundaries of “fortress conservation” (Brockington 2002; Brockington and Schmidt-Soltau 2004). While frequently couched in the apolitical language of biodiversity protection and preservation, the establishment of protected areas is an intensely political process which has had dramatic implications for the lives of thousands of rural and often marginalized Africans. Fundamentally, Fisher (2002:119) notes, protected area initiatives have “involved radical change in the relationship between people, land and resources.”

Focusing on the history and nature of conflict between rural communities and park managers on the northern edge of Mt. Elgon National Park, Uganda, this paper briefly examines the historical development of the protectionist conservation paradigm and some of the effects this approach has had on rural environments and livelihoods. This paper also presents preliminary findings that suggest that protectionist park policies have fostered land tenure insecurity over the past three decades which has exacerbated poverty and conflict. Such tenure seems also to have led to environmental degradation in the forms of soil loss, water siltation, and increased in-park resource use.

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From Wyoming to Colonial Africa: The Origins of the Protectionist Paradigm

The concept of the national park, the model for the majority of current protected areas world-wide, was born in Wyoming, USA on March 1, 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park (Borgerhoff Mulder and Copolillo 2005; Chatty and Colchester 2002). In an act signed by President Ulysses S. Grant, more than two million acres of land were “reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy or sale...and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people” (United States Statutes at Large 1872, cited in Nash 1967:108). The Yellowstone model, with its roots in 19th century romantic philosophy which celebrated the inherent value of untouched “Nature,” embodied the spirit of strict protectionism; “all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park [were to be preserved]...in their natural condition” (United States Statutes at Large 1872, cited in Nash 1967:108). The creation of Yellowstone prohibited human settlement and denied numerous Native American populations access to resources within the gazetted area. As a result, the US military evicted thousands of Bannock, Crow, Sheepeater and Shoshone Native Americans, who had a significant historic role in shaping the presumably “Natural” Yellowstone landscape (Morrison 1993, cited in Chatty and Colchester 2004:3).

Paralleling the appropriation of native lands in the United States, British colonial officials brought a slightly modified version of the Yellowstone model to Africa at the close of the nineteenth century. The British first established game reserves in South Africa in 1895 and in Kenya in 1896 (Borgerhoff Mulder and Copolillo 2005). Like Yellowstone, these reserves were created without local consent or consideration of historical local land-use/tenure practices, principally for the recreation of foreigners (Chatty and Colchester 2002). To some extent hunting was allowed in many of these early reserves, but then only by Europeans; hunting by Africans became “poaching”(Adams and McShane 1992; Neumann 1998). Suddenly, with a few strokes of the colonial pen, activities central to African livelihoods for centuries, such as collecting firewood, grazing of livestock, hunting, gathering of medicinal plants, harvesting of timber all became “illegal” in many areas across Africa (a persistent bone of contention between people and parks globally). Colonial conservation legislation reclassified native land as colonial land, negating traditional land uses and attitudes, and centralized the control of natural resources in the hands of the colonial state (Fisher 2002; Igoe 2002). Neumann (1998:34-5) writes, the creation of national parks was “one component of the wider process of colonial appropriation of land and natural resources...[as well as] a symbolic legitimization of that process.”

Euro-American conceptions of unspoiled “wilderness” under-girded the process of conservation-oriented land appropriation in Africa (Adams and McShane 1992). In many areas, colonial officials re-invented land-use histories based on their erroneous assumptions that certain areas designated for conservation had no history of human occupation or that native residents had left no historical ecological imprint (Adams and McShane 1992; Brockington 2002; Neumann 1998). These officials conceived of local land-users as threats to protected ecosystems rather than historic managers or users of them. During the age of European exploration of Africa, scores of pith-helmeted Europeans misread vast areas of forest and savannah as existing in their pristine state. Contrary to colonial claims, recent scholars have contended that many of the supposed “wildlands” of Africa were in fact highly anthropogenic; that is, produced by human activities, rather than in isolation from them (Adams and McShane 1992; Fairhead and Leach 1995). Appealing to the natural state of the proposed conservation lands, colonial officials created imagined histories which effectively erased the ecological legacies of human activity from landscapes and with them historical residents’ claims to the land. Moreover, by classifying local people as categorical threats to the goals of conservation, colonial resource managers could justify the exclusion of local residents from protected area planning as well as their forced displacement.

The form and character of these early conservation initiatives have largely shaped contemporary biodiversity protection practices. Igoe (2002:88) writes, colonial “conservation programmes were built on a foundation of legislation that gave the government direct and centralized control of land and natural resources...To the present day these laws have remained on the books with minimal revisions.” Despite the recent popularity of community-based approaches (see Western and Wright 1994), post-colonial era conservation in Africa has been rife with exclusionary, protectionist conservation practices which have entailed the involuntary displacement of large populations of local people (Brockington 2002; Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2003; Chatty and Colchester 2002; Schmidt-Soltau 2003).

Protected Areas in Colonial and Post-Colonial Uganda

Uganda's system of protected areas began in 1900 with the Buganda Memorandum of Agreement which brought 1,500 sq mi of forests under the control of the British Uganda Administration (Webster and Osmaston 2003). Through subsequent agreements in the Toro, Ankole and Bunyoro regions the British government assumed control of "all forest and waste and uncultivated land," encompassing many thousands of square miles (Webster and Osmaston 2003:125). As in many areas of the colonial world (Lynch and Alcorn 1994), the British justified these large-scale appropriations by claiming that the land was not held privately in the individualized British tenurial manner—despite long histories of use—and should be held in trust for African populations. Such a position implied that the African populations were unable to manage their lands themselves, a belief held by colonial regimes throughout the continent (Adams and McShane 1998). The colonial government managed many of these Crown forests for timber production, allowing rural populations limited access (Uganda Forest Department 1961).

The Uganda national parks system originated in 1952, with the designation of three national parks—Murchison Falls, Queen Elizabeth and Kidepo Valley (Chhetri et al. 2003). Over the past five decades, Uganda's protected areas have expanded to cover 33,000 sq km in 10 national parks, 10 wildlife reserves and 710 small forest reserves (Howard et al. 2000:859). Though some use is permitted in the wildlife and forest reserves, current law prohibits all settlement, cultivation, grazing, hunting and gathering within the national parks. Nevertheless, Howard et al. (2000) note that violations are widespread and the rural populations surrounding such areas often depend on protected resources for survival. Currently, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) is responsible for the management and administration of Uganda's 10 national parks, though a variety of other governmental entities have managed protected in various capacities over the past century. Similar to Igoe's (2002) observations in Tanzania, the history of protected area management in Uganda has been characterized by a rigid protectionism which began with the establishment of the British Crown forest lands and continues largely unaltered today (Hulme and Infield 2001). Chhetri et al. (2003) and Hinchley et al. (n.d.) suggest that such policies, which have denied local communities access to protected resources, have ignited significant conflict between local resource users and managers throughout Uganda's colonial and post-colonial history.

Given Uganda's staunchly protectionist history of natural resource management, the early 1990s marked a dramatic shift in official UWA policy by including more collaborative and participatory approaches (Chhetri et al. 2003; Hinchley et al. n.d.; Scott 1998). Such a radical change, Chhetri et al. (2003:29) note, was inspired by the recognition that:

1. without the participation of affected communities, conservation initiatives can neither be effective nor equitable;
2. a negative attitude of local communities toward protected areas still prevails;
3. many rural Ugandans still depend on in-park resources for their subsistence; and
4. benefits (income) from conservation must be shared with those who are negatively impacted by them.

It seems growing pressure from foreign donor governments and NGOs may have also had a hand in precipitating this transition (Hulme and Infield 2001). While UWA has not enacted collaborative management on a large scale, it has, in conjunction with several conservation and development NGOs, taken steps toward developing community-based initiatives in Bwindi Impenetrable, Kibale and Mt. Elgon National Parks. Due to erratic implementation, the small scale of these initiatives and the long history of community-manager conflict, such efforts seem to have had limited success thus far in quelling the large-scale tension between communities and managers.

Timetable and Methodology

With the financial and institutional assistance of the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) and the African Highlands Initiative (AHI), I carried two months of field research in Kapchorwa between June and August 2005. During this time, I conducted a series of 14 unstructured interviews with local government officials, NGO staff and Park officials as well as 29 semi-structured interviews with villagers from all 6 parishes of the

Benet Resettlement Area. I tried to speak to a diverse array of villagers—men and women of all ages, socio-economic standings and places of origin. In addition to my interviews, I observed and participated in several local NGO workshops and meetings regarding land use in Kapchorwa district. I was also able to observe land use practices and have a wide variety of informal discussions during my six weeks living with a family in the village of Kapnarkut. The interviews I conducted with villagers covered three main topics: 1) the participant's life history; 2) park policies and interactions; 3) past and present livelihoods/local political economy. The remainder of this preliminary report will focus on the highly contentious situation in on the northern fringe of Mt. Elgon National Park.

Mt. Elgon National Park, Uganda: Environmental and Social Context

Rising 4321 m above sea level, Mt. Elgon is a solitary, long-extinct volcano that straddles the Kenya/Uganda border, 100 km northeast of Lake Victoria. The oldest of the Rift Valley volcanoes, Mt. Elgon supports a mosaic of habitats, including closed canopy tropical hardwood and bamboo forests interspersed with a variety of grassland and riverine ecosystems (Reed and Clokie 2000; Scott 1998). As the plant communities on Mt. Elgon evolved in isolation from other mountain environments, a relatively high level of endemism emerged in Mt. Elgon's grass and forest lands. Though the ecosystems of Mt. Elgon do not support the degree of species biodiversity found in Uganda's western forests, Reed and Clokie (2000:155) report that several plant species appear to be endemic to the area, conferring a "unique conservation value." Mt. Elgon receives between 1500 and 2000 mm of rainfall each year in a relatively weak bimodal pattern; the wettest season spanning from April to October (Reed and Clokie 2000). Many rivers flow from Mt. Elgon's upper slopes, providing drinking and irrigation water for thousands of communities on Mt. Elgon and below into the increasingly arid plains.

The British colonial Forest Department took control of Mt. Elgon's forest lands first in 1929, waiting until 1936-7 to mark the entire boundary (Scott 1998). In subsequent decades, the legal status of the protected area on Mt. Elgon changed several times from Crown forest to forest reserve, forest park and eventually national park in 1992. Each change in status progressively restricted public access to protected resources, greatly shaping the contentious relationship between local communities and managers. Scott (1998:17) observes boundary disputes characterized the history of management since the inception of the protected area.

Mt. Elgon National Park currently lies within two governmental districts, Mbale and Kapchorwa, with 58 parishes directly bordering the park. Nearly all of the land adjacent to the park is under intensive agricultural production and many of these communities utilize in-park resources to varying extents. Scott (1998:13) estimates the population density of forest-adjacent communities in Mbale and Kapchorwa districts at 512 and 224 people per sq. km respectively. Two main ethnic groups occupy these districts: the Bagisu in Mbale and Sabinu in Kapchorwa. Historically, the Bagisu were primarily agriculturalists and utilized some forest and grassland resources. Populations of Sabinu have historically resided in both the upland areas and northern plains, largely emphasizing nomadic pastoralism (Goldschmidt 1976, 1986), while upland and plains groups supplemented their pastoral subsistence with hunting and gathering wild products and settled agriculture, respectively.

Today, most communities in both districts rely principally on intensive agricultural production for the bulk of their livelihoods. Mbale district is home to the regional urban center, Mbale, and is more directly connected to markets than Kapchorwa which has been relatively isolated until the recent construction of the Kapchorwa-Mbale road in 2002-3. Though there have been numerous disputes between forest-adjacent communities and park managers throughout the history of the protected area in both districts, nowhere has conflict been more intense and enduring than in the Benet Resettlement Area, Kapchorwa district.

A Case Study in Environmental Conflict: The Benet Resettlement Area

Comprised of approximately 7,500 ha on the northern edge of the park, this temperate upper-montane area is home to more than 30,000 Sabinu people who practice a mixture of intensive agriculture, pastoralism, gathering of wild products and wage labor. Contrary to some government and NGO reports, the two main groups of people in the resettlement area claim to share Sabinu ethnic identity as well as a long history of cultural and economic exchange. Governmental literature refers to the upland people by many names,

including the Benet, Ndorobo, indigenous Sebei, and Kony among others, creating a great deal of confusion on behalf of government officials and outsider NGO staff. Some government documents claim this group constitutes a separate ethnicity or “tribe,” however I was repeatedly informed by the people themselves that they are all of Sabiny descent, though they view themselves as “indigenous” to the mountain. The upland people commonly refer to themselves as *mosopishek* or *mosop* (a term which I was told translates roughly to “people from up the mountain”) as well as Benet.² *Mosop* households began to settle on the northern edge of the forest reserve in the early 1970s at the urging of the Forest Department, which was concerned with the human presence throughout the reserve’s interior.

The second main group of Sabiny in the resettlement area originated in the northern Ngenge plains (referred to locally as *soishek* or *soi*, meaning “people from the plains”). With the fall of Idi Amin in 1978 and the subsequent political upheaval in Uganda, large numbers of military weapons came into public circulation throughout the country. Cattle raiding groups such as the Karamojong and Pokot, who had once carried out their raids with spears, bows and arrows, suddenly had increasing access to these firearms and could more easily take cattle from pastoral agriculturalists like the lowland Sabiny. As the raids became more violent on the plains, hundreds of households began to move up the slopes to settle on the forested edge of the reserve in order to escape the growing threat. Such emigrations were so pervasive that today, one governmental official observed, over 1/3 of Kapchorwa district is completely unpopulated.

At the outset of the 1980s, the Ugandan Forest Department began official efforts to resettle the scattered *mosop* families residing in the forest reserve. These upland people were to be settled along with the growing population of *soi* households displaced from the northern plains³ on small, nucleated plots of land on the northern fringe of the forest reserve. Managers had ignored the upland residents since the gazettement of the original protected area in 1936. However, as the *mosop* have been historically isolated from participation in the national market economy and have recently begun small-scale agricultural cultivation in the reserve, reserve officials (like post-colonial officials in other areas of the world) came to view them “as impediments not only to the state’s conservation policy but also to its general desire to modernize” (Chatty and Colchester 2002:5). The Forest Department thus justified the resettlement as a means to promote environmental and economic developmental interests. Though some *mosop* left their settlements in the scattered montane grasslands voluntarily, many did not wish to leave their abundant pasture land to become permanently settled farmers.

With limited funds, the formal resettlement exercise took place in 1983. In six weeks, the Forest Department staff allocated plots of land to all males over the age of 18, issuing deeds to forest reserve land before it had been legally excised. The resettlement exercise solely granted land and did not provide any services to help people move or information concerning their rights to use of protected area resources. Allegations of unfair distribution and misappropriation continue to circulate today. Moreover, the initial resettlement exercise did not successfully relocate all the communities within the protected area, leaving a sizeable population from an area known as Yatui to be expelled at gun-point in 1992. Relations between the protected area managers and the residents of the Benet Resettlement Area were tenuous after the resettlement exercise, but because the Forest Department did not actively prevent most in-reserve grazing and resource extraction, there were relatively few conflicts with villagers.

A new era of confusion and conflict emerged with the transition of the protected area from forest park to national park in 1992. When the governmental body in-charge of the administration of the park (then Uganda National Parks, now the Uganda Wildlife Authority) resurveyed the park boundaries, they found that the

² The term “Benet” is used differently by different actors. Most often, it is used to refer to the several communities who were evicted from the forest in the 1970s and early 80s—these are the people who declare indigenous status. Within that general usage, there are a group of people who maintain that they originated from an area in the park called Benet. Perhaps in an effort to legitimize their own land claims, settlers from the plains have also begun calling themselves Benet, asserting that the term connects them to the Benet Resettlement Area which they now call home. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will refer to the group of former pastoralist hunter-gatherers by the descriptive Kupsabiny term, *mosop*.

³ The Forest Department did not offer an explicit explanation for granting land to the displaced plainspeople. One Forest Department official who aided in the resettlement exercise noted that many from the plains had migrated to the area and began to cultivate several years before resettlement began; granting them land as well it was thought was a matter of expediency and an effort to minimize conflict.

resettlement area which was supposed to have been no larger than 6000 ha was in fact more than 7500 ha. Despite the fact that the government had allocated land to households throughout the 7500 ha, which the households subsequently cleared and planted, the Uganda National Parks staff redrew the park boundary, removing the 1500 ha from the resettlement area and declaring those who lived there “encroachers.” Over night, roughly 6000 people who had invested great effort and resources clearing and planting the 1500 ha were told the land no longer belonged to them and they would have to relocate once more—this time without an allocation of land

Both villagers and local governmental officials vehemently protested the new boundary, eventually securing a Parliamentary order calling on UWA not to forcibly relocate any residents until the dispute could be resolved. Though UWA has repeatedly promised villagers that they would address the uncertain situation, the UWA administration has delayed to such an extent that villagers, with the help of the national NGO the Uganda Land Alliance, have pursued litigation against UWA.⁴ Under the stated interest of clarifying village claims, UWA has resurveyed the resettlement area and moved the boundary twice since 1993 (in 2002 and 2004), claiming more land from the resettlement area.

Under Ugandan law, all human use of natural resources inside national parks is illegal and, unlike during the previous period of political instability, the new managers committed themselves to enforce regulations in a much stricter manner. No longer did the park managers overlook the numerous herds of cattle which many of the resettled *mosop* and others continued to keep in the park’s grasslands. Violent conflicts arose as “law enforcement rangers” began to impound cattle found in and around the park’s new boundaries and levy severe fines against violating herders. Numerous villagers who live above the 1993 boundary, recounted to me tales of harassment, threats and violence at the hands of park rangers (several alleged that in the past UWA rangers have killed several young men in the forest, shot at others and raped numerous women collecting firewood). Likewise, park officials reported to me cases of rangers attacked by villagers, who were angered by newly restricted access to the park resources. In recent years, UWA has experimented with granting some communities in other areas bordering the national park limited access to specific renewable resources, such as bamboo and firewood, contingent on legally recognized land rights. No communities in the upper region of the Benet Resettlement Area qualify for these privileges due to the fact that their tenure land rights are not officially recognized.

Throughout my interviews, villagers spoke with great animosity towards the park and its employees. There was great confusion about why their access to the mountain’s natural resources was restricted. Park officials told me they had made numerous attempts at “sensitizing” villagers as to the purposes of the park as well as their rights and restrictions, however, few villagers I interviewed claimed to have heard of these sensitization meetings. The *mosop* interviewed were deeply distressed that park managers could keep them from using certain resources that they have had historically depended on and felt they had inherent rights to use; these included, timber for building materials, honey, firewood, medicinal herbs, bamboo, and fodder. Only a small minority of my research participants felt they derived any benefit from the park’s existence, and even then had difficulty enumerating such benefits. As well, most villagers discussed the park rangers with fear and disdain.

The rangers patrol the outskirts of the villages in an intimidating fashion, dressed in army-like fatigues and carrying rifles. The common Kupsabiny word for ranger is *sikirek* or soldier, a term which evokes the militaristic perceptions villagers have of the rangers. One resident told me, “they [the rangers] have power because they have guns.” Within the roughly 1500 ha of the Resettlement Area that remains officially within the boundaries of the park, UWA rangers foster feelings of intimidation and land tenure insecurity among residents; they frequently approach farmers in their fields and tell them the land is not theirs but rather park land and that they should prepare to leave despite the Parliamentary order.

Though I was unable to speak with many UWA personnel, the few I did speak with noted some hostility towards the village “encroachers,” who they felt did not seem to understand the value of conservation work.

⁴ At the beginning of August 2005, when this research was concluded, this case was still pending after three years. Subsequent reports from the resettlement area note that the court found in favor of the resettled communities, though precise details are unclear. The results of this case, in their favor or otherwise, could have massive implications for the residents of the resettlement area.

One park manager remarked that there was an inherent and irreconcilable conflict between the UWA's protectionist perspective and resource use orientation of local people. From the management perspective, village cultivators and herders posed the most significant threat to the park's fragile ecosystems. Yet none of the park staff I spoke with seemed inclined to probe deeply the reasons why so many people are willing to risk fines and/or bodily injury to graze or clear new agricultural land in the park's ecosystems.

Resettlement, Livelihoods and Subsistence Change

Throughout the world park-people conflicts have repeatedly centered on displacement (Brandon et al. 1998). While many researchers have examined the effects of human activity on wildlife and conservation projects, Brockington (2002) notes that there has been relatively little research into the effects of conservation related displacement and resettlement on human livelihoods. Many of the people living within parks, whether historic inhabitants or recent migrants, have been already living at the margins of national society and thus are particularly vulnerable to economic and social disruption. In describing the social repercussions of evictions from the Ugalla River area in Tanzania, Fischer (2002:133) contends that resettlement initiatives, in particular, often constitute "critical historical events;" defining moments in the recent history of a people.

Conservation-related resettlement exercises, set within already unstable and dynamic contexts of economic and social change, have often exacerbated preexisting conditions of poverty and social disintegration (Brockington 2002; Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2003). Cernea (1997a:19) lists eight of the most significant impoverishment risks from involuntary resettlement: landlessness; joblessness; homelessness; marginalization; food insecurity; loss of access to common property resources; increased morbidity and mortality; and community disarticulation. Rural societies have developed livelihoods and subsistence strategies contingent upon access to specific local resources. As the goal of strictly protected areas is to limit or prevent human use of many of those natural resources central to rural livelihoods, conservation-related relocation has often disrupted and transformed such livelihoods, even when carried out in the most sensitive of ways (see Cernea 1997b).

Over the past three decades, the Sabiny of the Benet Resettlement Area have experienced similar livelihood transformations. Despite sharing common cultural practices, language, distant ancestors and a long history of exchange, the *soi* and *mosop* groups pursued radically different yet interrelated subsistence practices before their relocations to the Benet Resettlement Area. In the plains, the *soi* emphasized semi-nomadic agricultural production, cultivating mainly millet, sweet potatoes, *nompok* (a yam-like tuber identified as *Labitae queer* by Goldschmidt [1976:376]), cassava, yams, beans, maize and other vegetables in addition to their extensive cattle and smallstock herds. Goldschmidt (1976) notes that though *soi* widely practiced agriculture, they saw themselves primarily as pastoralists. My interview participants noted that agricultural land tenure in the plains was largely individualized by household, while grazing lands were held by villages in common. Their settlements were more easily accessible by road and thus had longer standing connections with the expanding market economy. The road network also linked the *soi* with other agricultural communities as well as some access to social services, such as education and health care provided by the colonial and later independent governments.

Up the mountain, *mosop* communities did not have the same access to markets or social services that their *soi* relatives did, with few if any roads reaching their highland settlements. The *mosop* were historically pastoralists who supplemented their diets by hunting game (primarily forest antelope) and gathering wild foods from the forest. They kept sizeable herds of cattle (several informants estimated upwards of often 50-100 per household) as well some sheep and goats, grazing them both in the grasslands and forests. Honey also played a significant role in *mosop* subsistence and ritual life. Using the stems from the highland bamboo forest stands, *mosop* women wove baskets which they would trade along with honey, wild meat, and bamboo shoots to *soi* communities in the plains for agricultural staples such as maize and millet. *Mosop* settlements were widely dispersed throughout the vast montane grasslands and forests. They used land and kept bee hives communally and as such, had no pre-existing notions of private land tenure. In the 1940s and 50s, *mosop* women began to bring seed potatoes back with them from their trading excursions, which they then planted in abandoned *kraals* (cattle enclosures) in the grasslands.

Though *soi* and *mosop* pursued different subsistence strategies in the plains and in the mountains, cattle played a central role in both groups' lifeways, my informants argued, since their ancestors led their own herds from Ethiopia or Sudan down into Kenya and Uganda. Nutritionally, cattle products (namely, milk, blood and to a lesser extent meat) were mainstays of *soi* and *mosop* diets. Cattle reserves provided food security in times of food shortage or crop failure. Goldschmidt (1976, 1986) confirms that historically, cattle were central to Sabiny social relations and ritual activity. Cattle represented a key status symbol for men; the wealth and ability of a man to provide for his family was measured by the size of his herd. Both *soi* and *mosop* exchanged, slaughtered and consumed cattle at important ritual occasions such as circumcision ceremonies and marriage celebrations and, before widespread conversion to Christianity, sacrificed burnt cattle offerings on ridgetops.

The resettlement of both populations during the 1970s and 80s brought dramatic changes in livelihoods. The *soi* and *mosop* alike struggled to cope with the rapid transition to intensive, montane cultivation. Several of the staple crops that the *soi* had grown successfully in the hot, dry plains did not fair as well in the cooler, wetter climate of the upland slopes. Faced with the new environmental conditions, *soi* agriculturalists shifted their attention from crops such as cassava and millet to primarily maize, potatoes, and beans. Accustomed to semi-permanent flat land cultivation, many *soi* cultivators had little idea of how to prevent erosion on the often steep slopes of their new land.

The Forest Department settled *mosop* and *soi* households together and most *mosop* quickly adopted similar intensive agricultural methods, adopting farming techniques from their neighbors. With the exception of limited potato cultivation, only a few *mosop* had engaged in permanent agriculture prior to their resettlement. While many of the *soi* had their herds of livestock severely depleted by the Karamojong cattle raiders, the *mosop* initially kept their large herds on their traditional lands up the mountain after the initial resettlement exercise. Clearing the mostly forested lands required tremendous effort and financial resources to which many of the *mosop* did not have access, forcing them to sell large tracts of their allocated land and/or cattle.

Today, *soi* and *mosop* grow a variety of crops for subsistence as well as the market. On the slopes of the Benet Resettlement Area, one finds a patchwork of maize, potatoes, beans, bananas, coffee, barley, wheat, pasture land, assorted greens, pumpkin, peppers, other assorted vegetables and a few stands of eucalyptus. The recently constructed road connecting Mbale and Kapchorwa has dramatically increased access to markets and contributed to increased cash-crop production. Farmers sell their surpluses to middlemen who bring their trucks to farms and village trading centers. Few farmers use agrochemicals, citing a lack of money to afford them, though most told me they would like to use fertilizers to increase their dwindling yields. Despite a shortage of grazing land, livestock rearing is seen by many as the most reliable and lucrative activity. The division of agricultural responsibilities between genders is pronounced; men tend to be more in charge of organizing larger scale, commercial production while women tend to focus on household subsistence production. Ellis (2000) writes that when faced with socio-economic pressures, rural households turn to a varied array of activities to diversify their livelihoods. Similarly, the increasing pressures of landlessness, decreasing yields and economic marginalization have led residents of the Benet Resettlement Area to diversify their subsistence strategies. Many people, especially women, supplement their incomes by selling various products to their neighbors such as milk, eggs or illicit forest products. Wage agricultural labor has also gained importance.

Despite the cultural significance of cattle, under the current protectionist park policies, the *mosop* have been unable to make use of their historic grasslands and, as a result, are becoming increasingly impoverished. Upon finding cattle grazing inside the park boundaries or coming from the park, the UWA rangers impound cows and levy fines which most villagers are not able to pay. The people who go to the forest are not ignorant of the law; they go there because they do not have enough land or money to rent land on which to graze. As such, these tend to be the people who do not have enough money to pay the fines, so each time they are arrested, they have to sell off one or two cows, reducing their herd. With insufficient grazing land, the same people face a difficult decision: they can sell their herd, go back to the forest and risk further arrest or watch their cows die of malnourishment. Selling all their cattle is both culturally unacceptable and would eliminate their primary insurance against food insecurity. This management strategy, while effective in reducing grazing in the park, has served to further pauperize the people who have the least; it reduces the grazing pressure on the park without having to compensate cattle owners for their lost livestock in the name of punishment.

Tenure Insecurity, Environmental Degradation, Poverty and Conflict

In addition to resettlement, tenure insecurity on the peripheries of protected areas has serious implications for the lives of local people as well as park management. Land tenure is an often complex system of rights which encompass ownership and access to resources. Numerous common property theorists have argued the importance of secure tenure, legally or culturally defined, in the sustainable use and management of natural resources (Lynch and Alcorn 1994). Areas of tenure insecurity often become open-access and susceptible to rapid degradation as described in Hardin's (1968) "Tragedy of the Commons." Banana and Gombya-Ssembajjwe (2000:88) summarize the argument succinctly, "individuals who lack secure rights are strongly tempted to use up these resources before they are lost to the harvesting efforts of others." Though usually thought of in a legal context, tenure is more than a set of relationships between people and property; tenure encompasses and defines a set of social relations (Lynch and Alcorn 1994). As such, the imposition of a new tenurial system can bring with it an imposition of new social relations of power and control.

Through conflicts over land tenure, people contest these fundamental power relations which determine access and use rights. Moore (1993:396) writes that such conflicts are enacted both materially and symbolically—the landscape is both "soil and semiotics." That is, the acts of land use and the prohibition of use can be interpreted as simultaneously both material and symbolic, embedded within the contexts of contested power relations. Boundaries, as physical indicators of rights, are hence often the loci of intense conflict. Their creation and manipulation are intensely political acts which confer and deny rights. Paasi (2005:120) contends "power and governance are part and parcel of the construction of boundaries" and have a long history in state-subject conflict. As noted above, mapping and remapping park boundaries have been key points in the conflicts between communities and park managers in the Benet Resettlement Area. In the struggle for control over the contentious region of the resettlement area, boundary demarcation seems to have been part of the UWA strategy to assert dominance over community actors. My preliminary research suggests that the tenure insecurity produced by shifting those boundaries has brought about increased soil and water degradation, economic and social inequality between communities and further utilization of in-park resources.

As noted above, neither the *soi* nor *mosop* historically practiced intensive montane cultivation, and as a result, neither were prepared for the problems of soil loss related to such practices in an area of sloping fields and high rainfall. In the 2004 State of the Environment Report for Kapchorwa district (NEMA 2004:10), the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) notes that loss of soil productivity is a severe problem concentrated in the upper slopes of Mt. Elgon. In my research, farmers above (where tenure is insecure) and below (where it is secure) the contested park boundary both reported dramatic decreases in yields over the past two decades, most attributing these losses to soil runoff. The numerous formerly clear streams and rivers that cut through the landscape now run red and turbid with sediments year round. Though erosion, water siltation, decreasing yields and food shortages are found throughout the resettlement area, these challenges seem to be most intense in the areas where land tenure is most insecure.

In recent years, there has been a strong NGO and governmental agricultural extension presence in the area which has targeted prevention of soil erosion as their primary objective. Action Aid, the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), the National Agriculture Advisory Services (NAADS) and other organizations have conducted programs promoting perennial tree crops, agroforestry, contour bands and other erosion control measures. However, these groups have only extended their services to those with secure tenure. Throughout the lower area of the resettlement area, there are numerous small woodlots, intercropped banana and coffee tree plots, and napia grass contour bands amidst the maize and potato fields. Whereas in the upper area, there is hardly any evidence of soil/water conservation efforts; there are few long-term tree crops and the maize and potato cultivations are often riven with erosion gullies. In addition to having little access to agricultural extension services, numerous farmers in the upper area told me they were hesitant to invest in energy and resource-intensive soil conservation measures due to the uncertainty of how long they will be allowed to stay there.

The bisection of the resettlement area has also produced a growing social and economic inequality between communities above and below the contested boundary. As mentioned earlier, only those with secure land

tenure are eligible for governmental services such as agricultural extension, roads, health services and education. The improving road networks in the lower region of the resettlement area have enabled farmers there to participate in newly expanding markets. The middlemen who drive their trucks to farms and village centers are unable to reach the upper region, leaving farmers there to transport their produce to lower areas on their backs or by donkey. The lack of passable roads significantly limits their capacity to participate in cash crop markets.

According to the current law, permanent building construction is also not allowed in the insecure area. No one there is permitted to construct houses with metal roofs or brick/cement blocks because the government has yet to excise the area from the national park. In my interviews, I found that house materials are highly symbolic; metal roofs and bricks signify social and economic status, a permanent presence on the land and secure ownership as well as participation in the modern national economy. Though most people above the boundary cannot afford the materials for permanent structures, they perceive the prohibition as an act of economic marginalization. Not only are they unable to claim permanent residence, they are also prevented from partaking in the process of economic development extended to their neighbors who also have better access to education and health services.

The growing gulf in standard of living between the two areas has generated significant animosity. Kinship ties are strong between households throughout the resettlement area. In times of stress, the people with insecure tenure rely on their relatives in the lower areas of the mountain for food and money, depleting already thin resources. Some members of communities below the contested boundary also reported an increase in theft since the establishment of the national park. Such growing dependence fostered by tenure insecurity is of great concern to many of the residents of the resettlement area. While community relations were once relatively placid, demands for resources and theft have led to an unprecedented level of violent conflicts among villagers themselves.

Within a context of rapidly decreasing yields, limited access to markets, and insecurity of tenure, a sole reliance on agriculture is perceived as a less viable livelihood strategy in the upper region of the resettlement area than it is in lower areas. As described previously, people have increasingly turned to resources from the interior of the park to diversify their livelihoods. Not all residents of the resettlement area depend on in-park resources equally. As insecurity has been concentrated among communities closest to the forest edge, in-park resource use has become most important to families in those areas. Many people who live above the boundary graze their cattle in the park's grass lands. Others also gather firewood, bamboo shoots and other wild products and harvest timber which they sell to others down the mountain. Any use of national park resources is illegal, and those who venture into the forest risk heavy fines and physical violence. Villagers are well aware of these risks—nearly everyone I interviewed in the upper area had either been punished or knew someone who had been punished for utilizing in-park resources—yet because they felt they could not derive a sufficient income given the constraints of insecure tenure, they felt they had no other option than to pursue these illicit resources. Frequent punishment has further contributed to the economic marginalization of those with insecure tenure and fostered animosity within communities and towards park managers.

Conclusion

As the evidence of the often socio-economically disastrous effects of “fortress conservation” practices and involuntary resettlement schemes has accumulated, many researchers and conservation practitioners have begun to ask, who should pay the price for conservation? (Borgerhoff Mulder and Copolillo 2005; see Western and Wright 1994). To date, displaced communities have borne the most immediate and devastating costs of biodiversity protection. With the loss of access to resources, some of the world's poorest people have been pushed further to the margins of society and crushed under the weight of increasing poverty and starvation.

In many respects, the case of the residents of the Benet Resettlement Area echoes the experiences of thousands of people displaced by protected areas across the globe. Amidst an already tumultuous climate of social and economic change, the pairing of resettlement with the protectionist conservation paradigm seems to have drastically transformed and constrained local Sabiny livelihoods. Despite the impressive resilience of communities who adapted to radically new livelihood strategies in the matter of a few years, such transitions

do not come without their social and environmental burdens. My research suggests that individuals and households turn to their social networks and illegal forest products for assistance in times of insecurity. Future research should be focused on the ways that villagers have and continue to cope with rapid subsistence change especially in the context of tenure insecurity and the implications those strategies have for local environmental management.

My preliminary research also suggests that tenure insecurity, continually reinforced by UWA policies and employees over the years, has created and deepened social and economic rifts between certain communities by marginalizing roughly 6,000 residents of the resettlement area as “encroachers.” With the possibility of eviction ever-looming, the 6,000 people residing in the upper area of the resettlement area have not made the costly investments in land and water conservation that many of their neighbors have and continue to rely on illegal in-park resources to supplement their meager incomes. From my observations, soil degradation seems to be especially concentrated in this upper area, while soil/water conservation initiatives are concentrated in the lower area. Future quantitative research, ideally employing remote sensing/imaging Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis, is needed to confirm or deny these observations. This environmental situation is compounded by the absence of governmental services in the upper region of the resettlement area; even those farmers who may wish to adopt soil and water conservation methods lack the educational infrastructure necessary to undertake them.

During my stay in the Benet Resettlement Area, I witnessed a great deal of energy focused on addressing the pervasive problems of decreasing soil productivity and other forms of environmental degradation in the lower region of the resettlement area where tenure is secure. Individual farmers and institutions have made important strides towards sustainable land use over the past decade. Under the guidance of the African Highlands Initiative (AHI) and Action Aid, non-governmental, governmental and civil society organizations throughout Kapchorwa district have recently begun efforts to coordinate their activities in order to improve natural resource management. However, until land tenure is legally sanctioned in the upper area of the resettlement area, these prodigious efforts will continue to overlook perhaps the most environmentally precarious area of the district—a site of intense degradation.

Community-based conservation initiatives enacted in other areas of the national park also hold great promise for the livelihood diversification of the residents of the Benet Resettlement Area as well as environmental conservation in the northern area of the park. Such promise is nevertheless unattainable under the current state of legal paralysis; without secure land tenure, the forest-adjacent communities—those most suited to involvement in these programs—are not eligible for participation. Unruh et al. (2005:191) write, “conservation and sustainable development require significant cohesion on the part of the community in participation, enforcement, and derivation of benefits.” For meaningful involvement of forest-adjacent communities, the divisions brought about by over a decade of severe tenure insecurity must be attended to.

The recognition of land tenure is a clear first step in addressing the current state of poverty, conflict and environmental degradation. However, to facilitate sustainable livelihoods within the Benet Resettlement Area and improved biodiversity protection within the national park, such tenure must come along with improved social services, including education, health care and access to markets for all households.

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