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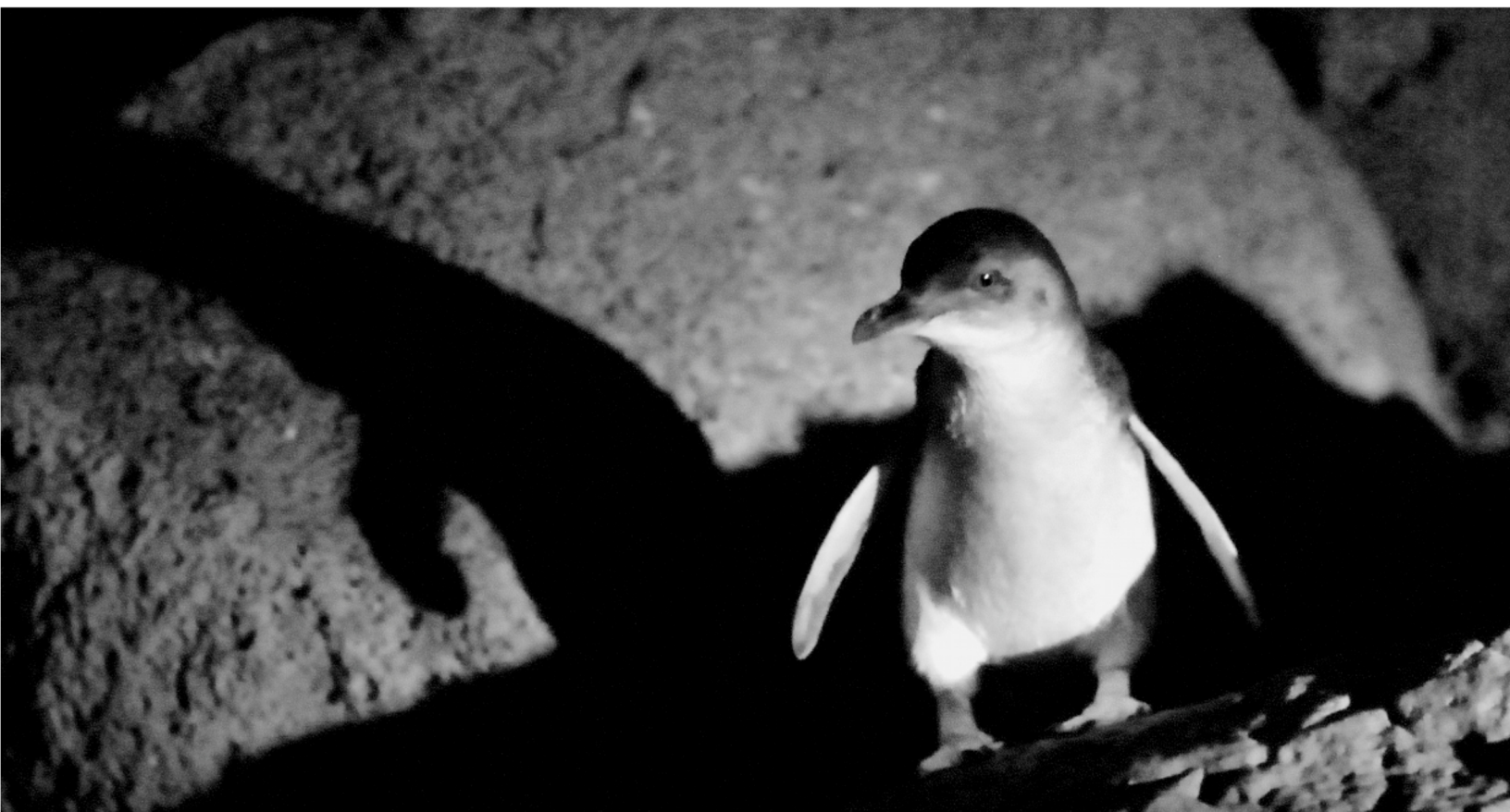
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## Conservation is Sexy! What Makes This So, and What Does This Make? An Engagement with *Celebrity and the Environment*

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### Abstract

This essay offers an engagement with Daniel Brockington's (2009) recent book *Celebrity and the environment*. I highlight the book's contribution to debate regarding processes of human displacement arising through biodiversity conservation under conditions of neoliberal capitalism. I first situate the book in relation to contemporary perspectives on displacement, justice, and human rights, using examples to illustrate complex and dynamic patterns of conservation inclusions and exclusions globally. This is followed by a summary of Brockington's typology of conservation celebrities, and of the ways in which celebrities assist with the amassing of conservation finance. I proceed to consider the roles of a celebrity-saturated mass media (and mediated) 'spectacle of conservation' in structuring social and consumptive engagements with the 'non-human' world globally. I draw attention to how diverse peoples in conservation landscapes might become part of the spectacle of conservation by reconfiguring themselves as cultural objects of touristic consumerism in a script not necessarily of their choosing. By way of acknowledging the significance of social networks and alliances in influencing conservation perspectives and practice, I close with a disclaimer regarding my own long-term collaborations with the author of *Celebrity and the environment*.

**Keywords:** conservation, celebrity, displacement, neoliberalism, tourism, spectacle, capitalism, biodiversity, biocultural diversity, finance

### INTRODUCTION: AMONG THE APES

Page 43 of Daniel Brockington's (2009) book *Celebrity and the environment* describes the 1930 US release of the box office blockbuster film *Ingagi*. This was a sensational 'documentary' of a supposedly real expedition to the Belgian Congo, led by hoax British explorer Sir Hubert Winstead. Its original advert proclaimed the camera to faithfully record the expedition's finding of 'wild women who live with gorillas'. Its closing scenes featured a group of scantily-clad women living with

said gorillas (actually actors in costumes), and its publicity poster depicted a grinning gorilla carrying off one of these women, his hand cupping her naked breast. As it happens, I recently watched the first episode of *Among the apes*, a wildlife programme broadcast in the UK in 2009 on *Five*<sup>1</sup>, presented by British primatologist and presenter, Charlotte Uhlenbroek (tipped at the time to be the next David Attenborough, and appearing in Brockington's list of celebrity wildlife film presenters on p. 61). Ten minutes into the film, Uhlenbroek, standing metres away from 'Bwoba', a rival male chimpanzee in the territory of the Sonso (chimp) community of Uganda's Budongo Forest Reserve, describes the character of the chimp ("supremely confident") and the territorial dynamics of competing males in this location. Speaking quietly into the camera, to a soundtrack of soft trumpet jazz, she tells us, "it's just great when you get to the stage where you really can get... sufficiently close that I could just go and cup his nuts in a sign of submission".

The terms of engagement may be dynamic, but in the

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modern world wildlife, 'wilderness' and conservation of 'the environment' are portrayed and perceived as exciting, exotic, erotic, and glamorous—as 'sexy'. At the same time, people dwelling in the localities desired for their wildlife, wildness, or rarity, generally are not. Instead, they have tended to be present, and presented, as variously absent, primitive, problematic, impoverished or assistant to the main story; rarely speaking on their own terms or from their own frames of reference, experience and value.<sup>2</sup>

In this engagement with *Celebrity and the environment*, I review some forms and implications of this situation of the 'ins and outs' of conservation. I elaborate several foci of Brockington's book to provide: 1) a contextual exploration of the multifaceted displacement effects that may accompany conservation initiatives under conditions of neoliberal capitalism (with examples drawn from various African contexts in particular); 2) a distillation of Brockington's analysis of the part increasingly played by celebrities, including celebrated conservationists, in mediating and amassing conservation finance; and 3) a consideration of the ways that a celebrity saturated and mass media 'spectacle of conservation' dramatises social and consumptive engagements with non-human nature<sup>3</sup> globally to produce particular social and environmental effects. I close with a disclaimer clarifying my own long-term collaborations with the author of *Celebrity and the environment*, in acknowledgement of the always present significance of social networks and friendships in shaping conservation perspectives, organisation and critique.

### CONSERVATION 'INS AND OUTS'

The disembedding of human livelihoods and lifeworlds from landscapes desired for biodiversity conservation has been the subject of, and subjected to, vigorous analysis and debate. Key issues are the existence and extent of such practices, their necessity for conservation success, and the implications for those affected. That this debate is live is indicated by a spate of current publications. A recent issue of this journal (*Conservation & Society* 2009, Volume 7 Issue 1), for example, provides an informative range of views, debates, and case-studies exploring the controversial issue of human displacement—social, cultural, economic, and epistemological—that might occur as land comes under national and global management to further conservation objectives (also see Brockington & Igoe 2006, and the review article by Adams & Hutton 2007). A special issue of the journal published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (*Policy Matters* 2007, Volume 15), draws attention to human rights issues as they may arise in the creation and policing of conservation areas. A special issue of *Biological Conservation* elaborates the difficult trade-offs (social, economic, ecological) made in conservation choices, and the ethical issues that thereby arise (opened by Minter & Miller 2011; see in particular the article by McShane *et al.* 2011). Cases where local people have lost out in such

trade-offs, and where dissent has been variously silenced, are detailed in a recent special issue of *Current Conservation* (2010, Volume 3 Issue 3<sup>4</sup>). Other collections draw out the complex displacements effected by proliferating market-oriented demands associated with neoliberal approaches to conservation (see Igoe & Brockington 2007; Brockington & Duffy 2010; and the contributions these papers introduce; also Sullivan 2006; Fletcher 2010; Büscher *et al.* In press). A new reader on *Poverty and biodiversity conservation* (Roe & Elliott 2010) collates articles detailing global relationships between biodiversity conservation and 'poor people', many of which highlight displacement issues. While this debate has been bubbling away for years, it currently is being termed 'the new conservation debate' between the protected areas priorities of 'nature protectionists' and the development-oriented concerns of 'social conservationists', accompanied by calls for a 'more explicit discussion of the value and ethical dimensions of this debate' (Miller *et al.* 2011: 948).

Lands from which dwellings, livelihoods, and different nature values have been removed to create and maintain 'wildlife' and 'wild' landscapes for elite access and resource capture have long characterised societies exhibiting extremes of privilege and poverty. Marx, for example, notes the destruction of 36 villages in 1079 by William the Conqueror of Normandy, so as to create a royal hunting ground of the New Forest in south England [Marx 1974 (1887): 685]. The systematic displacement of dwelling as a zeitgeist of contemporary conservation landscapes is further associated with a particularly European Enlightenment and Utopian ideal that sharply alienates human from non-human natures. A desire for experience of 'wilderness' lands emptied of, or apparently prefiguring, human engagement (West & Carrier 2004: 485), arises in part from this alienation and the socio-ecological transformations with which it is associated [Polanyi 2001 (1944)], including negative impacts on biodiversity. So while the modern science of conservation biology may consider biodiversity conservation implicitly to require the separation of 'wild nature' from people (e.g., Terborgh 1999), this distinguishing of natural history from human dwelling is itself an understanding and orientation associated with the constructions of human–non-human relationships guiding European Enlightenment ideals. It is a *particular* cultural understanding that, nonetheless, has become universally transmitted and applied via the structures and technologies of modernity, with both ecological and social effects. The outcome has been the enclosure of landscapes from which people are variously excluded as the core method of formal conservation work, alongside the multiple land and resource enclosures that have made possible the structural inequities characterising industrial modernity.

While environmental conservation has a history of seeking to resist and regulate the effects of extractive industry, corporate interests currently are systematically entraining conservation to fit the requirements of business (as described in superb detail in MacDonald 2010a). Élite capture of 'natural resources', including biodiversity, is thereby extended, and

both capitalism's and conservation's radical separation of livelihoods and localities are further entrenched (Sullivan 2010, In press). Key to this trajectory is a downplaying of the myriad ways in which nature is understood, utilised, and served by peoples and production practices located in landscapes that become conceived and conserved as 'natural nature'; as nature that somehow is separate from, and even opposed to, culture. The created wild landscapes and wildlife populating national parks and other conservation areas thereby become those encountered only temporarily by people, even where those lands have previously been known, dwelled in, and sustained by, diverse human inhabitants. The US Wilderness Act of 1964 enshrines this ideal by defining 'wilderness' as land where 'man himself is a visitor who does not remain' (in Siurua 2006: 74). A contemporary example of the implications of this ideal can be provided by the Masaola National Park in north-east Madagascar. Comprising an area of around 2,300 sq. km, Masaola was declared a National Park only in 1997, becoming a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site ten years later. Here, '[a]lmost the entire surface area of the park is designated the... Hard Core' to which access 'is only open to park staff, paying guided tourists, and researchers (also paying), but not to the local population' (Keller 2008: 653). Establishment of the park has entailed the uprooting of settled households and cultivated fields, for which promised compensation was not received, and severe punishment is now authorised for 'illegal' accessing of resources in the park (documented in Keller 2008).

Conservation and displacement scenarios are becoming increasingly complex under contemporary shifts in environmental governance towards valuing and capitalising new measures of environmental health present in biodiverse landscapes. Biodiversity conservation landscapes are being additionally conceived as locales of avoided deforestation, as sinks for carbon emitted via combustion of fossil fuels elsewhere, and as sources of additional financial value via the burgeoning international offsetting trade in carbon and other new global signifiers of environmental health such as 'ecosystem services' ([www.un-redd.org](http://www.un-redd.org); Bekessy & Wintle 2008; Bayon & Jenkins 2010; Roe *et al.* 2010a; also critique in Böhm & Dabhi 2009; Melick 2010; Phelps *et al.* 2010; Corbera & Brown 2010). Possible displacements arising via such carbon-conservation landscapes are exemplified by the case of the Mount Elgon National Park in Uganda (Checker 2009; and references therein). In recent years, Mount Elgon National Park has earned saleable carbon credits for northern energy corporations, based on the standing biomass of park woodland. Here, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) evicted approximately 6,000 people from the Mount Elgon National Park in 1993. Subsequent to this, the UWA partnered with the Forests Absorbing Carbon Dioxide Emissions Foundation (FACE), established by the Dutch Electricity Generating Board to create, maintain, and enhance forests for the absorption of CO<sub>2</sub>, and to access the tradable carbon credits that would thereby become available. FACE financed the planting of 25,000 hectares of trees inside the Mount Elgon National

Park, and maintains the rights to the carbon credits accruing to the plantation. These have been sold to businesses and individuals through voluntary offset markets by its for-profit marketing partners the Climate Neutral Group and GreenSeat (Checker 2009: 45–46). The FACE project and its funding have justified continued evictions and violent conservation policing of the area, and have not met promises to provide beneficial employment to local people (Checker 2009; Roe *et al.* 2010a: 326).

But this conservation and displacement story does not end here. Tracing the sale of carbon credit offsets from the Mount Elgon National Park illustrates the achingly surreal nature of contemporary global connection and displacement in service to both extractive industry and nature conservation (cf. Tsing 2005). In this case, the purchase of the Mount Elgon plantation carbon credits has permitted the offsetting of sustained emissions by newly established coal-fired power stations in the Netherlands. These in turn are supplied by imported coal, mined through the environmentally tragic practice of blasting away mountaintops in the US Appalachian mountains (Checker 2009: 46–47; Butler & Wuerthner 2009), a landscape also known, inhabited, and valued by diverse indigenous and settler peoples (Cook 2000). The trail in its entirety illustrates the enforced demands on local peoples to exit from lands with which they are entwined productively and in many other ways, so as to service a range of global markets, from tourism to new environmental commodities such as carbon. The punishing irony in this case is that the offsetting trade in carbon is legitimating and sustaining the high energy and other consumption practices of the world's wealthy inhabitants, while displacing local livelihoods that represent relatively minor global environmental impacts.

This production of a non-human nature set aside for enjoyment and consumption by particular sets of people, and increasingly to provide 'sinks' and tradable offsets for the globally problematic pollutions of these same sets of people, arguably has created what Dowie (2009) terms 'conservation refugees'—peoples whose multiple and autonomous means of sustenance and identity have been wrested from them to service conservation effort.<sup>5</sup> It is an imaginary that validates and empowers certain knowledges and aesthetics of human and non-human natures over others (as explored and theorised, for example, in Abrams 1996; Hannis 1998; Ingold 2000; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Harvey 2005; Griffiths 2006; Sullivan 2006, 2010; Curry 2008; Keller 2008; Neves 2009). Realities lying outside the conceptual and discursive boundaries of this worldview—whether analytical, epistemological, and/or ontological—thereby become 'displaced and disobedient' in relation to mainstream conservation discourse. As such, they can be subject to dismissal, disrespect, and disciplining (Sullivan 2003; Paudel *et al.* 2007; Igoe & Sullivan 2009; papers in *Current Conservation* 2010, Volume 3, Issue 3). Indeed, the modern universalising and transcendent lens through which conservation is approached and rationalised perhaps is intrinsically threatening to 'biocultural diversity', since it requires varied discounting of diverse nature

knowledges associated with those who have dwelled in landscapes currently capitalised as conserved nature.

A number of international provisions and resolutions recognise that human rights are damaged through such displacements (summarised in Roe *et al.* 2010b: 4). A new Conservation Initiative on Human Rights (CIHR) launched in 2010 by the IUCN, in conjunction with the largest international conservation non-governmental organisations (NGOs), appeals to standards in international law in seeking to promote common and consistent human rights principles in conservation work (IUCN 2010). Such 'in-house' initiatives are to be applauded, whilst recognising that legitimisation by yet another modern transcendent and standardising universal category—that of 'human rights'—also can be in tension with the emplaced and idiomatic knowledges of those localised and displaced through global discourses (e.g., Bauman 1998: 2–3; Tsing 2005). Spaces where the views of other actors and commentators can be expressed and heard remain crucial, whilst recognising that possibilities for communication between diverse ontological realities regarding human–non-human relationships might be circumscribed even in such spaces.

Biodiversity conservation's 'ins and outs' clearly constitute an animated arena for engagement. Brockington's (2009) book is a major contribution to this debate, and it is to this framing of circumstances that I speak here. On the one hand, Brockington (2009) describes and explains in considerable detail some of the reasons why these situations have emerged historically. On the other, he provides extensive clarification of the structuring effects these patterns have and will continue to have in a globalising contemporary world dominated by capitalist social relations and made saleable via mass media representations of mass produced commodities. In doing so, Brockington traces how conservation and environmental causes of necessity have become entrained with broader processes of commodification and accumulation of private material wealth, both of which underlie most of the environmental problems of apparent current concern.

In a world where what is popular is not necessarily what is 'good' (for 'the environment' or anything else), professional environmental conservation walks a path fraught with tensions and contradictions. Should it be financed through engaging with neoliberal processes of creating, packaging, and marketing products to be sold competitively on global markets (Büscher *et al.* In press), and through forming alliances with corporations and wealthy individuals who have done this so successfully in other fields (detailed in Brockington's (2009) chapter six)? If more conservation consumption amounts to competitive success, then what about the corresponding impacts on that which is being sold? In the case of tourism revenues for conservation, for example, it becomes harder to sell the vision and experience of wilderness or wildlife when hordes of safari trucks and buses carry tourists to consume the same view. How does conservation endeavour reconcile the contradictions raised by the direct impacts that touristic consumption has on other species and landscapes, or the significant indirect impacts that air-travel appears to have on the climate that sustains these

(Sullivan 2006: 116; Adams 2008; McDermott Hughes 2008)? Capturing new carbon values from conservation landscapes to facilitate paid mitigation of such effects is an administratively heavy way around this quagmire and, as noted above, may exacerbate conservation's displacement effects. If conservation choice moves increasingly towards generating revenue from high-end, low-impact 'ecotourism' accessed by a global élite, then how can this be equitably aligned with conservation's excluded masses who also are affected by global environmental losses? Structural inequality means that the diverse peoples living somewhat inconveniently alongside or within globally valued conservation landscapes probably can never hope to participate as consumers in the expensive world of global conservation tourism.

As Brockington articulates, celebrity plays a critical role in all of these contradictions, both in their resolution and in their coming into being. In the next two sections I review and summarise Brockington's classification of conservation celebrities, and highlight some associations with conservation finance.

### CONSERVATION CELEBRITIES, AND CELEBRATED CONSERVATIONISTS

Celebrity involvement in conservation is diverse. Brockington's (2009) typology of celebrity engagement and impact is incisive and important, and I outline this here.

First are people who already are celebrities who align themselves with conservation and environmental causes, thereby lending charisma to those causes, enhancing their own appeal in the process (Brockington 2009: chapter three). Type specimen here is actor Harrison Ford, who recently championed rainforest conservation for the North American mega-environmental NGO Conservation International (CI) by being filmed having his chest-hair removed with hot wax. In this, his obvious pain becomes the pain experienced by the earth at the clearing of old-growth forests for cattle-ranching, soya bean planting, or oil exploitation, at the same time as being our human pain at such transformations (Brockington 2009: 25).

Second are those who are makers and presenters of wildlife and natural history films, a burgeoning industry that seems to 'reveal' the nature of nature to viewers, at the same time making its own saleable celebrities through the growing popularity of its presenters (Brockington 2009: chapter four). Here Brockington juxtaposes two rather different specimens. First is the refined, well-spoken authority of Sir David Attenborough, inseparable from the high-end, aesthetically beautiful, and expensive authoritative accounts of the natural world produced by the BBC's Natural History Unit in Bristol [known in the industry as 'green Hollywood', and awarding its own 'Green Oscars' in the form of prestigious 'Panda Awards' (Brockington 2009: 142)]. Attenborough's 'antithesis' is Australia's Steve Irwin, whose rugged style involved dressing in 'safari shorts, often much the worse for wear', 'jumping on or picking up animals, particularly if they were dangerous', and

the use of ‘everyday language and unscripted... exclamations’ (Brockington 2009: 48). This contrast is mirrored by Irwin’s spearheading of cheap-to-make, ‘personality-driven, reality-TV-type programmes’ (Brockington 2009: 52) that can be easily purchased by an increasing number of satellite-TV channels able to screen programmes globally with some natural history content. An effect has been the proliferation of a particular media performance of nature, attracting attention through drama and sensation (cf. Tsing 2005: 57), and emphasising charisma, sex, violent kills, and ‘warrior’-style encounters with spectacularly dangerous animals in order to sell (Brockington 2009: 46–47). Irwin’s own dramatic death by a stingray in 2006 becomes the logical mediagenic endpoint of this trend, being ‘the most searched for article on Google for that year’ (Brockington 2009: 41). Typical of the opportunistic cynicism of late-capitalism and associated media-driven consumptive frenzies, this spectacular wildlife death has been capitalised through the production of various lucrative commodities. As Brockington (2009: 55–57) describes, the Irwin brand includes a ‘Steve Lives Surfware’ range, ‘Halloween costumes of wetsuits complete with a bloody stingray barb’, and new programmes and products that exploit the ensuing celebrity prominence of Irwin’s eleven-year old daughter Bindi [amid a flurry of campaigns ‘urging that the child be allowed to develop out of the public eye’ (Brockington 2009: 56)]. This array of ‘goods’ is complemented by the work of Irwin’s ‘conservation company’, Wildlife Warriors Worldwide Ltd., and the exhortation that khaki—‘the symbol of Steve Irwin’—is ‘... more than a colour. It is an attitude. It is a stand to do something positive in our world and a passion to make a difference’.<sup>6</sup> The presence of this conservation company notwithstanding, and in keeping with the contradictions that characterise much institutionalised conservation work (Adams 2008; Brockington 2009), there is something rather odd here. This is that surely the production and marketing of all the Irwin merchandise actually works *against* an environmental ethos that might invoke reduced production and consumption of ‘stuff’ so as to engender reduced environmental impacts?

Brockington’s (2009) third and final category is that of the ‘conservation celebrity’: the celebrity that has become this through their conservation work (Brockington 2009: chapter five). Typical here are the well-known expatriate and European conservationists that populate the environmental sector in the post-colonial world, particularly in East and Southern Africa. Think of Richard Leakey, son of the famous expatriate paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey and head of the Kenyan Wildlife Department throughout the 1990s. As Brockington (2009: 74) recounts, Leakey showed ‘brilliant panache’ in the staging of media stunts, including the controversial [and ultimately lucrative (Tom 2003: 3)] burning of African ivory valued at a million dollars, in an event designed to highlight the plight of the African elephant due to poaching for ivory. Brockington (2009) throws together some unlikely bedfellows in this chapter. I would not have associated humans rights activists such as Chico Mendes or Ken Saro Wiwa with high-profile expatriate East African conservationists such as Leakey,

Iain Douglas-Hamilton (aristocratic founder of the NGO Save the Elephants), and Joy and George Adamson [famous for Joy Adamson’s 2000 (1960) portrayal, in books such as *Born free*, of life as the wife of a game warden in colonial Kenya and the relationships with wildlife this made possible]. Mendes and Saro Wiwa worked for the sustenance of local livelihoods and lifeworlds embedded in landscapes under threat by incursions of industrial capital, becoming internationally famous in part because they were murdered for their political work. The issues they contested were, respectively, the establishment of large-scale cattle-ranching and displacement of rubber tappers in the Brazilian Amazon, and Ogoni displacement through Shell’s exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta. Leakey and Co. are conservation heroes for an expatriate and European established wealthy class, associated with conservation work in the spectacular wildlife settings of British ex-colonies, which also are linked with variously severe trajectories of displacement of local peoples. Nevertheless, Brockington (2009) does much here to approach the difficult intersections of wealth, class, race, and gender that structure conservation effort and environmentalism (also see Garland 2008).<sup>7</sup>

#### **AMASSING CONSERVATION FINANCE WITH MASS MEDIA**

All these versions of environmental celebrity are indelibly entwined with mass media in the production, distribution, and consumption of conservation commodities. The reasons for, and the structuring implications of, conservation involvement with mass media are Brockington’s (2009) key and critical insights.

The reasons for conservation associations with mass media include the apparent need for conservation to function in, and become part of, a capitalist global political economy. Chapter six of *Celebrity and the environment* provides a thorough summary of some of the emerging and consolidating alliances characterising conservation finance. Conservation-oriented NGOs have proliferated in the wake of the neoliberal environment of the 1980s (Brockington & Scholfield 2010), but financial resources are concentrated in four: the World Wide Fund for Nature, CI, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and The Nature Conservancy (Brockington 2009: 91–97), with the African Wildlife Foundation also visible in these terms (Sachedina *et al.* 2010). Funding increasingly is sourced from philanthropic foundations, corporations, and seriously wealthy individuals (cf. Chapin 2004; MacDonald 2008). Celebrity endorsement and involvement, accompanied by mediated mass publicity, is significant at every step in producing these alliances. Celebrities sponsor NGOs, use their wealth and public profile to establish their own foundations, or become celebrities by virtue of their commercial success and subsequent philanthropic and conservation work. And in the growing recursive relationship between celebrity and conservation, celebrities (including hyper-wealthy conservation donors and investors) are rewarded with conservation awards (cf. Benjaminsen *et al.* 2005; Tsing 2005: 266), distributed by the

mega-conservation NGOs at mediagenic glamorous events, which themselves use mass media to publicise particular forms of conservation work (Brockington 2009: 90).

This web iterates a nexus of relationships that is concentrating conservation estate and decision-making power in the hands of a few wealthy organisations and in the property portfolios of extremely wealthy individuals. Some of the figures are staggering. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, built from information technology wealth, donated 261 million USD to CI, itself only created in 1987, and with a board consisting largely of corporate representatives (Brockington 2009: 100–101). CI works increasingly with corporations seeking offsetting solutions for their industrial impacts in particular locations, and to realise conservation capital through finding ways of monetising lands owned or purchased that exhibit newly priced 'ecosystems services' (Bishop 2008; MacDonald 2010a). In a classic case of resource capture, media mogul Ted Turner (vice-president of Time-Warner, and founder of CNN), owns hundreds of thousands of hectares of rangeland in the American West, and in Patagonia, the former being home to the largest private bison herd in the world as well as to reintroduced wolves and other threatened species (Brockington 2009: 104). As Brockington (2009: 137) notes, his "extensive rewilded ranches can be fished and hunted for a price, and his private herd of buffalo feed customers eating at a chain of restaurants across sixteen US states". Turner was deployed as a celebrity keynote speaker at the 2008 IUCN World Conservation Congress, not for expertise in biodiversity, but to legitimate IUCN and the World Conservation Congress in broader corporate and media organisational networks (MacDonald 2010a: 544). The African Parks Foundation, established in 2000, is funded through oil wealth garnered by Dutch billionaire Paul van Vlissingen, as well as by Rob Walton, chairman of the global supermarket company Wal-Mart. The Foundation takes an explicitly business-oriented approach to park management in Sudan, Ethiopia, Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia and South Africa, and has been linked with evictions of people from ensuing park lands (Brockington 2009: 105, 107).

Brockington's (2009) chapter seven reviews some of the more problematic outcomes of these alliances. They concentrate power over land and peoples in organisations and individuals that have no democratic mandate for the work they are doing. At the same time, they work to construct and maintain structures that favour elite and powerful views of the world, sustaining the recursive hermeneutic circle that establishes and supports systemic inequality. This is both in terms of the distribution of wealth and access to land and resources, and the distribution of ecological impact—for despite oft-repeated assertions that "it is well-known that the #1 cause of environmental degradation in the emerging world is poverty" (Kiernan 2010, emphasis in original), it surely is the accumulation of wealth and associated consumerism that produce greater per capita environmental effects. The outcome is a masked paradox—the world's most celebrated conservationists and their industry collaborators frequently

are also those with relatively high incomes and consumptive impacts on the global environment. As Brockington (2009) notes, this too is a racial politics, such that conservation celebrities, celebrated conservationists, and those in the funding and corporate worlds with whom they frequently are aligned, tend not to be people of colour.

At the same time, to become a competitive rather than a resistant player in modern political economic structures, conservation needs to be packaged and presented in ways that are attractive, consumable, and ultimately profitable. Capitalising pragmatically on the entwined and proliferating phenomena of celebrity and mass media is a way that conservation can play this game. An interrelated phenomenon also drives this movement in conservation. This is the impetus in the current phase of capitalism to capture the material world as digital mass media representations, accompanied by a consumptive shift whereby social and environmental 'reality' increasingly is created so as to conform with expectations shaped by mass produced and consumed images. Brockington (2009) engages with these complex contexts in his final theoretically nuanced chapter. He draws in particular on the influential 1967 text *Society of the spectacle* by French critical theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord [1992(1967)]; as well as on current work by James Igoe that emphasises Debord's relevance for understanding the current structuring of human-environment relationships through mediation by mass circulated images (Igoe 2010; Igoe *et al.* 2010). In the next section, I outline some of Debord's propositions and their implications for creating conservation as 'spectacle' [also see Mitman 1999, drawn on extensively in Brockington's (2009) analysis; Tsing 2005; MacDonald 2010b].

### CONSERVATION AS 'SPECTACLE'

In *Society of the spectacle*, Debord [1992(1967)] highlights the ways modern recording technologies and their products, particularly images, generate particular separations and connections between that which is recorded, the ensuing representation (or product), and consumers of that product. He clarifies some of the implications of how new recording technologies are entwined with modern and industrial structures of production, and the replications and distributions that thereby are possible. His argument in part is that mass production, circulation, and shared consumption of replicated and frequently spectacular images, permits these to become in a sense more real, and certainly more immediately accessed and experienced, than the phenomena they represent and mediate. Capitalist production and consumption dynamics, and the social and socio-environmental relationships they engender, thus become increasingly mediated through consumption of representations that are distant from that which is represented—entwined with production and consumption of the affects or emotional experiences reinforced by such representations and their associated social meanings.

Advertising exploits this suite of phenomena to powerful effect. A Porsche may be portrayed as signifying virility,



wealth, and desirability; it is these that become desired and seemingly acquired through purchase, the materiality of the Porsche itself perhaps being rather incidental (whilst having significant but masked material effects). To take this a step further, many people currently are becoming entranced by the virtual landscapes they can create in the digital worlds of multiplayer online games. In *Second Life*, for example, players can purchase and develop ‘land’, creating fantastic digital representations of landscapes that reflect sublime fantasies that themselves are embedded in the largely unreachable glimmers of capitalist wealth and celebrity.<sup>8</sup> These virtual worlds are entered through the screen of a computer and experienced by the self in the guise of a digital avatar whose characteristics are likely to bear little relation to the embodiment of a player. A player’s online journeys express entertaining relationships with digital representations of desired but immaterial landscapes, whilst simultaneously perhaps stimulating expectations for ‘real world’ landscapes to conform to those accessible in online fantasies (a point to which I return below).<sup>9</sup>

Debord [1992(1967)] notes further that relationships of wealth and power structure the processes of media production, such that content reflects choices and perceptions by media producers (often themselves in service to the visions of those hiring them, as is the case in advertising), at the same time as being shaped by what producers think the public desire and will consume. The whole is entrained by an economic context that requires the endless seduction of consumers to purchase more ‘stuff’, so as to sustain production, consumption, and economic growth—phenomena that are increasingly mediated and manipulated through the production and consumption of digital representations available *en masse*.

Capitalist conservation is inseparable from these dynamics and structures of spectacle and virtual worlds. It uses mass media to sell its concerns and wares, reinforcing some versions of nature and of human relationships with non-human worlds over others (cf. Garland 2008; Igoe *et al.* 2010; Igoe 2010; Büscher & Igoe under review). It orchestrates spectacular events through which ideologically dominant positions within the conservation movement are themselves created, maintained, and ‘naturalised’ (as analysed by MacDonald (2010b) for the foregrounding of the IUCN’s ‘Business and Biodiversity’ initiative at meetings such as the World Conservation Congress). Wildlife and natural history films, while having clear educational, entertainment and affective value, also tend to dramatise nature, thus permitting consumers to experience this drama vicariously. As such, mass media representations of wildlife convey ‘unreal’ portrayals of ‘nature’, focusing on the sensational, the picturesque, the exotic, and the unpeopled. Nature becomes packaged and sold in such a way that it might outcompete all the other products also on offer. The ensuing mass reproduction and distribution of nature’s variously constructed simulacra, i.e., superficially similar copies, become perceived and ‘known’ as real, even as they are unreal and frequently exclusionary. The final twist in the tale is the shaping of real landscapes and relationships between human and non-human worlds, so that they fit the

character of marketed and desired representations. As West and Carrier (2004: 485) affirm, this assists a project of creating ‘landscapes that conform to important Western idealisations of nature’, by transforming landscapes and peoples into conservation and cultural commodities, whose representation and marketing confirms these idealisations.

An example that clarifies these phenomena of separation and reshaping via mass circulated media representations is that of a recent online advertising trailer for Port Lympne Wild Animal and Safari Park in Kent, UK.<sup>10</sup> Port Lympne is part of a cluster of estates in Kent and Central Africa established by the late John Aspinall, and managed by the Aspinall Foundation, to further the conservation of rare and endangered species. Mimicking the advertising style used to sell high-end African safari experiences, the trailer is designed to convince the viewer that it is possible to experience ‘real Africa’ in Kent. Against an innocuous soundtrack of sanitised African drumming, an authoritative narrator tells the viewer that they will ‘[b]e transported into another world on the African safari experience’ and will ‘hear... amazing stories from our safari rangers’, who in the trailer are authenticated with a South African accent, khaki costume, and a long beard. Amidst footage of visitors photographing wildebeest and zebra from open safari vehicles, interviewed tourists exclaim over the close contact they have had with the animals (“You certainly don’t need a pair of binoculars here... Very easy to get some good photographs isn’t it?”). The narration concludes by describing the experience as “the closest thing to Africa without even going there”. But of course this is an Africa populated by a wildlife of large and dramatic animals and devoid of Africans, which nonetheless becomes the experience and expectation of an Africa that somehow is real.<sup>11</sup>

The recently released film *Hotspots*, made by CI under the direction of celebrity conservation biologist Russell Mittermeir, further illustrates the production of conservation as spectacle. The trailer spectacularly dramatises conservation work, using tropes of treasure, rarity, and the exotic in signifying global localities of high biodiversity, and of crisis and threat in specifying the urgency of conservation work.<sup>12</sup> This sets the scene for the entry of the story’s leading actors. These are the heroic, predominantly white and male conservation biologists, whose work is a military-style operation featuring long lensed cameras, helicopters, camouflage fatigues, a racy soundtrack, and machismo. The cinematic experience thereby generated is similar in vision, sound and feeling to that of Hollywood portrayals of contemporary US military engagement in ‘Third World’ frontiers, echoing, for example, *Apocalypse now* (Vietnam) and *Black hawk down* (Somalia). The trailer closes with a deep male voice-over describing the protection of hotspots as ‘the mother of all wars’. Occluded are the cultural and linguistic diversities aligned with these same biodiversity ‘hotspots’ (Loh & Harmon 2005)—diversities that are similarly under threat from the forces that make spectacular conservation at these frontiers both necessary and possible. Absent are voices that might speak of the different nature knowledges and values

that have permitted maintenance of biocultural diversities in such localities over millennia. The tragedy is that such 'poor' peoples can become part of what is under attack in this conservation 'war', even though they may hold openings into detailed everyday practices of being human in relationship with non-human natures that are relatively nourishing, sustainable, equitable, and poetic (e.g., Brody 2001; Posey 2002; Harvey 2005; Griffiths 2006; Impey 2009).

The spectacle of conservation sometimes also encourages peoples of conservation landscapes to become commodified, packaged, and presented as saleable; authentic on terms guided by paying customers, and ultimately a performance structured by spectator expectation. In the linkages of cultural tourism with ecotourism and conservation areas, for example, local people may be involved to the extent to which they can sell portrayals of themselves to paying visitors of different cultures and from distant locations. Such initiatives again generate swathes of paradoxes. 'Tradition' becomes commodity, conveyed in forms whose authenticity is structured to varying extents by the desires of consumers (West & Carrier 2004; Peluso & Alexiades 2005). Payments also are linked with manifestations of an additional authenticity, that of the good aspiring participant in modern development and the global market economy (Garland & Gordon 1999; Cohen 2010). Such commodifications direct and discipline embodiments of local landscape and cultural values towards satisfaction of desires welling up in the terrain of the wealthy global consumer, and in the companies that create, represent, and service these desires. In some cases, this has justified manufacture of new 'traditional' land-entwined communities literally as show-pieces for tourists. These capitalise on the popular status of indigenous people as generic 'celebrated conservationists' by creating new communities intended to perform the sorts of ecologically noble traditional practices that tourists expect to see (Brockington 2009: 133). Under a contemporary discourse of empowering indigenous people in a modern world, in the mid-1990s both the luxury Kagga Kamma lodge in South Africa and the foreign-owned private Namibian game park, Intu Afrika, introduced as tourist attractions displaced 'Bushman' communities exhibiting traditional Bushman skills and harmonious relationships with the land (Garland & Gordon 1999: 276–279). Such initiatives extend an impetus inspired by the colonial encounter of the European modern world with its 'primitive other' globally. This was to export and exhibit the spectacle of indigenous peoples, both living and their dead remains, in museums, circuses, and various touring staged performances throughout Europe and North America [as detailed for Australian Aborigines in Poignant (2004) and for southern African KhoeSān peoples in Skotnes (1997)]. In considering these historical precursors, the power relationships, projections, and strange fascinations structuring this encounter become clear. Despite the agency with which local people participate in and self-direct tourism ventures arising in the context of contemporary conservation situations, they tend not to be equal co-authors of the script that makes them variously saleable to conservation consumers from afar.

**CONCLUSION:  
THE CONSERVATION FRONTIER,  
AND A DISCLAIMER**

Conservation is structuring the world in ways that may be problematic in both ethical and ecological terms. In becoming a competitive player in the capitalist game through uptake of its technologies, assumptions, and celebrities, accompanied by alliances forged with wealthy organisations and individuals, conservation is facilitating capitalist capture of the new wealth found at the conservation frontier. The process is requiring ongoing transformation of the experience of non-human and human worlds into 'sexy', marketable commodities. The poignant existential displacements that flow from this transformation of nature into saleable spectacle, and of immanent ecological experience into manipulated extraneous desire, are well-known. They are articulated beautifully, for example, in the poem *Two Bears* written in the 1300s by the Persian Sufi poet Hafiz [1999(1300s): 123]:

Once  
After a hard day's forage  
Two bears sat together in silence  
On a beautiful vista  
Watching the sun go down  
And feeling deeply grateful  
For life.

Though, after a while  
A thought-provoking conversation began  
Which turned to the topic of Fame.

The one bear said,  
"Did you hear about Rustam?  
He has become famous  
And travels from city to city  
In a golden cage;

He performs to hundreds of people  
Who laugh and applaud  
His carnival Stunts."

The other bear thought for  
A few seconds.

Then started  
Weeping.

These transformations are playing significant roles in the ordering of society globally into hybrid arrangements of those able to consume conservation's products, those whose livelihoods are reorganised so that these products can be created and sold, and those profiting from emergent markets at the conservation frontier (Tsing 2005; Marks and Mipashi Associates In press; Sullivan In press). In contemporary circumstances then, and as Brockington's (2009)

contribution elaborates, it remains instructive to understand and problematise the rules of the game that conservation spectacle is playing and participating in, and the worlds, knowledges, and experiences it is bringing forth as a result. All of the relationships and outcomes summarised above might be defensible in conservation terms, if indeed they are accompanied by substantive ecological indications of conservation success. At the same time, however, capitalist conservation is promoting consumptive constructions of, and articulations with, ‘the global environment’, that do not seem to be in keeping with an ethos that might grow life’s ‘integrity, stability and beauty’ [to draw on Aldo Leopold’s (1949) famous articulation of a ‘land ethic’, in *A sand county almanac*, referred to by Brockington (2009: 64)]. The mass production of environmental merchandise (*aka* the Irwin brand described above), the mass promotion of long-distance tourism to generate conservation revenues, and the displacing of cultures with different ‘nature knowledges’ and ‘immanent ecologies’ (Sullivan 2010) so as to acquire land for conservation consumption as well as for offsetting industrial pollutions, are cases in point. The modern conservation spectacle appeals to, and sustains, the relatively wealthy of the world, who also tend to be those with the greatest per capita global ecological footprint. Intellectually, and pragmatically, how is it possible to square this circle?

The contemporary environmental zeitgeist indeed is characterised by massive global transformations effected through industrial capitalism, and featuring troubling increases in human populations (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2010). But this also is a world where grotesque inequality constrains access to land and resources globally, where the majority population occupies and consumes relatively little of the earth’s riches per capita, and where these ‘poors’ (Desai 2002) are squeezed into remnant rural landscapes on the periphery of capital’s enclosures, or to sprawling urban slums, only to be blamed and policed for causing environmental degradation. It is shocking that in much conservation discourse it is poverty and not wealth that tends to be constructed as the key problem for global biodiversity conservation (e.g., Sachs *et al.* 2009). Recent research suggests instead that it is the dysfunctional relationship between wealth and poverty that is of greater environmental concern, with biodiversity loss strongly predicted by measures of within-country inequality (Mikkelsen *et al.* 2007). Indeed, an alternative view might see that a mutually constitutive relationship can exist between biodiversity and the cultural diversity associated with the low consumptive living of ‘poor people’ (as mapped, for example, in Loh & Harmon 2005; also see Pretty *et al.* 2009). This is a relationship that contemporary initiatives for low-impact dwelling attempt to replicate, amidst modern planning systems that generally are obstructive towards any re-embedding of low-impact lifestyles with locality and landscape (Hannis *In press*). If the linguistic and cultural diversities of ‘the poor’ contribute to sustained biodiversity in remaining biodiverse landscapes, then it is disastrous for both human and non-human natures that these diversities are as displaced as biodiversity (UNESCO 2009)

through both extractive industry and conservation business for universalising commodity markets (Peluso & Alexiades 2005; Tsing 2005; Sullivan 2009).

In the conservation and displacement debate, then, these inequities and their associated ethical implications (e.g., Holland & Rawles 1996; Miller *et al.* 2011), require nuanced engagement beyond categories of biodiversity, poverty, and the population of ‘the poor’ (also Lambin *et al.* 2001). They warrant solutions beyond mass media marketing and pricing mechanisms, if relationships between human and non-human natures really are to be refocused towards the humane and equitable sustainability of diversity (Adams & Jeanrenaud 2008). Brockington’s (2009) book is an important and welcome contribution towards further opening up the terms and directions of this debate.

In closing this engagement, it would be professional to offer a disclaimer. I have known Brockington, the author of *Celebrity and the environment*, for many years. In the 1990s we went through the *rite of passage* of writing anthropology PhDs alongside each other. We shared, via letters written from one side of Africa to another, some of the beautiful, humorous, and more sobering experiences of conducting long-term field research in what for us were remote locations in rural Africa. We survived the writing of our theses in the even more extreme environment of our ‘office’ in the windowless sub-basement of the Anthropology Department of University College London. Each of us has experienced attempts by conservation organisations to censor work of ours that highlighted displacement issues. And since then we have written and worked collaboratively, becoming part of what has been described in a recent issue of *Conservation and Society* as ‘[a]n increasingly vocal group of authors [who] will likely continue to rake international conservation organisations over the coals for their alleged indifference to the plight of human beings, particularly those humans who already face the dust heap of history’ (Agrawal & Redford 2009: 7). In other words, critics may see this engagement as part of an effort to consolidate particular views in conservation politics, and perhaps even to acquire some sort of social science ‘celebrity’ status in this world.

Be that as it may, in summary my views of this significant book are as follows. It is clearly written—distilling complex areas of conceptual work into succinct summaries. It is coherently structured: moving from two introductory chapters introducing key terms and concepts; through three chapters distinguishing the author’s three main types of conservation celebrities and clarifying their significance; and closing with three chapters considering the structuring effects of broader contexts and the ways in which celebrity intersects with and reinforces these in the environmental arena. It is original, offering a startling and richly sourced account of the entwined and mutually supportive relationships between various forms of celebrity, environmental causes, and the organisations that support them and are supported by them. It is elegant, being a rare combination of intellectual insight, sensitivity, and artistic flare. I loved the thread of reference to Oscar Wilde’s work

that runs throughout, and its caustic reminder that it is not unusual for empowered society to discipline its most incisive commentators. And it is wonderfully funny in places; it is not often that I find myself laughing out loud when reading academic books on conservation. The only other comment I wish to make is that, Dan, I salute you!

## Notes

1. Available for viewing at <http://demand.five.tv/episode.aspx?episodeBaseName=C5147680001>. Accessed on September 30, 2009.
2. Three notable film exceptions are *Suits and savages: Why the world bank won't save the world* (2000), directed by Dylan Howitt and Zoe Young, and produced by Conscious Cinema, London (available for viewing online at <http://ifivatchnet.org/?q=en/node/2565>. Accessed on September 30, 2009); *A place without people* (2009), directed by Andreas Apostolidis, and distributed by FILMS TRANSIT International (<http://www.anemon.gr/place.html>. Accessed on March 23, 2010); and *Born in Etosha: The hidden stories, part 1 & 2* (2011), directed by Andrew Botelle and Robert Scott of MaMoKoBo Video Research, Windhoek, Namibia.
3. I use the term 'nonhuman' nature(s) when referring to organisms, entities and contexts other than the modern common sense understanding of the biological species of *Homo sapiens*. I note, however, that for many cultures that personify the 'nonhuman' and lean towards assumption of one humanity and many different embodied perspectives, this is itself problematic and even nonsensical. In the ontological domain of shamanic 'perspectivism', for example, there are no 'nonhumans' (Viveiros de Castro 2004).
4. *Current Conservation* 2010. Volume 3 Issue 3: [http://www.currentconservation.org/issues/cc\\_3-3.pdf](http://www.currentconservation.org/issues/cc_3-3.pdf). Accessed on March 26, 2010.
5. Also see <http://www.conservationrefugees.org>. Accessed on November 23, 2009.
6. See <http://www.steieirwinday.org/about>. Accessed on March 26, 2010.
7. As with any tendency, there are notable exceptions. Perhaps key here are the Kenyan Wangari Maathi and the Indian Vandana Shiva, both of whom receive brief mention by Brockington (2009: pp. 15, 86 and 88). Interestingly, these dynamic women intellectuals and activists approach environmentalist effort rather differently to mainstream conservation, by arguing and campaigning for the environmental and livelihood benefits embodied in local and indigenous land-entwined practices and cultural landscapes, particularly those associated with women. See <http://greenbeltmovement.org>, and Shiva's many publications (e.g., 1988).
8. See <http://secondlife.com/land>. Accessed on March 26, 2010.
9. A corollary here might be the way(s) in which pornography—the mass circulation of representations with explicit sexual content—structures expectations and experiences of bodies, sex, and sexuality (Sullivan 2011).
10. Available for viewing at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZyJE7x6MWo>. Accessed on November 29, 2009.
11. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that John Aspinall himself 'was... a self-declared misanthrope and reputed co-plotter of an extreme right-wing conspiracy against Britain's Labour government' (Benthall 2007:1).
12. Available for viewing at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY08NIXvrxc>. Accessed on February 23, 2009.

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