

Peace Parks amidst conflict: the political ecology of violent extremist mobilization in the WAP complex

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Abstract

The potential that nature parks and protected areas have to contribute to peace and/or conflict outcomes has been increasingly recognized in policy and scholarly literature. In the 2000s, researchers made a strong case that conservation efforts could contribute to inter-community and even inter-state appeasement, and therefore should be central to post-conflict peacebuilding efforts (Conca and Dabelko, 2002; Ali, 2007; Eckersley, 2007). Illustrating this trend, one notices the multiplication of protected areas and specifically of transnational “peace parks” (King, 2010), first and foremost in southern Africa. In the 2010s, though, several in-depth ethnographic studies questioned this optimism, by convincingly demonstrating that (the politics of) nature conservation can interact with the drivers of insecurity and fuel violent escalations. Building on political ecology perspectives, a growing literature has focused on the spread of problematic conflict trends dubbed ‘green violence’ (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016), ‘green grabbing’ (Fairhead et al., 2012), ‘green wars’ (Ybarra, 2012), ‘green militarisation’ (Lunstrum, 2014) and the greening of counterinsurgency (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016). These strands of research have made apparent that securitization of environmental concerns (Duffy et al., 2019) and the projection of states’ control, norms and value extraction over peripheral areas framed as wild and ecologically fragile (Ramutsindela et al., 2019) can easily clash with indigenous forms of natural resources management, fuelling hidden resistance and overt violence.

In light of these contrasting research results, the question whether conservation efforts are more conducive to generate conflict or peace dividends eschews generalised answers. Specific outcomes depend on contextual features, that only empirical studies can ascertain. And while the analytical purchase and causal power of several hypotheses has been tested, especially regarding parks and conflicts in Africa, most of the available research has focused on environmental protection and conflicts in Southern (Lunstrum, 2014; Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016), Eastern (Neumann, 2002; Blanc, 2020) and Central (Lombard, 2016; Verweijen and Marijnen, 2018) Africa. Much less attention has been devoted to French-speaking West Africa. This represents a considerable research gap, which is problematic not only for scholarly purposes, but also for policy, considering West Africa’s growing security volatility as well as centrality for the stabilization strategies of the international community.

Aiming to address this research gap, the transnational park complex dubbed WAP (consisting of the W, Arly and Pendjari parks) straddling across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Benin, provides a valuable case to expand our understanding of the interactions between natural resources management, protection, and conflicts. The WAP complex combines most of the conflict-prone features found in other African regions’ parks, including the legacy of a colonial imaginary (Neumann, 1995), a transborder articulation (King and Wilcox, 2008), and a neoliberal management (Massé et al., 2017) whereby the reliance on private paramilitary contractors and sophisticated surveillance highlights the emergence of a conservation–security–development nexus. In addition, the WAP complex sits amidst a jihadist insurgency and multi-scalar counter-insurgency efforts, underpinned by major smuggling flows (Marijnen et al., 2021).

Recent research (Kabore, 2018; Hubert, 2019) has shed light on how such dynamics interact with longstanding grievances regarding natural resources management in the WAP area, especially in Burkina Faso. However, no systematic and cross-country comparative studies have been carried out to ascertain the specific factors explaining whether, how and why such grievances lead to either conflict escalation or appeasement.

Noting the expansion, rooting and mobilization capacity of violent extremist groups in the WAP area (Brottem, 2022; Pellerin, 2022), the article aims to investigate the complex interactions between natural resources management, conservation, and conflicts around the WAP park complex. It builds on extensive ethnographic evidence, focusing on security perceptions and practices by local dwellers and rangers, collected in 2022 as part of a research-action project on natural resources governance and conflict sensitivity in the Sahel.

The comparison of data from different countries (Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin) and protected areas will help untangle the influence of different conservation management schemes (Funder and Gravesen, 2021) in conflict escalation and/or peaceful dispute settlement around natural resources. Furthermore, it will help to assess their relative explanatory purchase vis-à-vis competing hypotheses highlighting instead the significance of military tactics, economic opportunism, and religious factionalism in fueling violent extremism. Such an approach can contribute to expanding the understanding on nature protection and conflicts not only by adding a valuable case, but also by exploring new theoretical perspectives combining political ecology, peace research and critical terrorism studies (see LeBillon and Duffy, 2018).

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