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# A Critical Review of Environmental Conservation in Zimbabwe

Munyaradzi Mawere

**Abstract:** The discourse on “environmental conservation” is highly dynamic and has generated controversies of epic proportions in conservation sciences and environmental anthropology. Given the nebulous nature of conservation, coupled with the varying interpretations evoked by the deployment of the concept across different disciplines, a more robust understanding of the notion calls into question its practical manifestations and application in particular situated contexts – particularly within the conservation sciences and environmental anthropology. In Zimbabwe, conservation by the state has tended to favour and privilege Western scientific models at the expense of the “indigenous” conservation practices of local people, as informed by their indigenous epistemologies. This paper thus represents an attempt to rethink conservation in Zimbabwe, adopting the Norumedzo communal area in south-eastern Zimbabwe as its case study. The choice of Norumedzo is based on the fact that this is one area where the highly esteemed and delicious *harurwa* (edible stink bugs, *Encosternum delegorguei*) are found. As a result of these insects being valued as “actors” and the appreciation shown to both Western and indigenous epistemologies, conservation in the area has enjoyed considerable success. To this end, this paper lends support to the arguments of Walter Mignolo and Ramon Grosfoguel in their advocacy for critical border thinking in issues of knowledge regarding environmental conservation.

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**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, nature/wildlife conservation, environment/ecology, cultural anthropology, methods

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Zimbabwe is currently suffering from a myriad of environmental conservation problems, in addition to destabilising economic and political entanglements. As a result, environmental sustainability has become too difficult a practice to implement in the country. The Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) (2009) asserts that sustainable development can be conceptually understood as having three constituent but overlapping parts: environmental, economic and social-political. Several United Nations texts (the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document in particular) refer to economic, social and environmental protection as the “interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars” of sustainable development.

Yet balancing the conservation of nature’s resources with the needs for development has always been problematic in southern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe. This has been due to the compound effect of different factors, such as the unfair distribution of resources, an obsession with scientism, the disregard of indigenous epistemologies, population increase, low education levels and abject poverty (see Mawere 2013). These issues have collectively precipitated the conservation debate in Zimbabwe.

## Conservation Debates in Zimbabwe

Discussing the actual cause(s) of the environmental crisis in Zimbabwe has resulted in serious contestations amongst scholars, with some arguing that overpopulation and indigenous practices have triggered environmental degradation. Aylen (1941), for example, claimed that during precolonial times and the earlier part of the colonial period, human land use had little detrimental impact on the environment in Zimbabwe because of (i) the extensive nomadic and fallow practices used, which could well provide for the relatively low population densities and (ii) the employment of indigenous soil conservation measures. According to Bowyer-Bower (1996), a Western science-based awareness of the causes and effects of land degradation through inappropriate use and management – and the subsequent need for appropriate monitoring techniques and conservation measures – has been well established and legislated for in Zimbabwe since the twentieth century, resulting in a formal management infrastructure for the research, implementation and support of land use guidelines. It could therefore be argued that Bowyer-Bower and Aylen would view the environmental conservation crisis in Zimbabwe as the combined result of population growth and the resistance of local communities to the implementation of Western conservation techniques.

Other scholars blame science and colonialism for the country’s conservation crisis. In this vein, various contributors argue that land was neither a scarce resource nor under threat of permanent environmental degradation

during precolonial times and the earlier part of the colonial period (Moyo 1991). However, they argue that increasing colonial settlement and control resulted in an inequality of access to natural resources. They oppose Aylen's view that human land use practices at the time had little detrimental impact on the environment. They support their argument by referring to the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, which appropriated most of the fertile communal land from the majority of the population and converted it into commercial farms for the white settler minority. With an annual population growth rate in excess of 3.5 per cent (IUCN, 1988) and diminishing popular access to land, traditional conservation methods became impractical in the communal areas; as a result, land degradation set in.

Masaka similarly argues that the twin sisters of colonialism and science are to blame for the conservation crisis in Zimbabwe, since:

the colonisation of Zimbabwe and the rest of the African continent was predicated on a treacherous basis of trying to improve the lives of the people of Africa, when in fact it spelt doom to the Africans, and the resource dispossession that impoverished people that had managed to survive within their means prior to the advent of colonialism. (Masaka 2011: 331)

He maintains, further, that colonialism in Zimbabwe was predicated on the myth that the locals were not able to sustainably use the natural resources that they had at their disposal.

This discussion testifies to the debates between (formal) scientific conservationists and traditional conservationists. Yet in considering the trajectory of land contestations in Zimbabwe since the colonial period, one can safely argue that such fundamentalist perspectives do more harm than good with regard to the management and conservation of the natural environment and, consequently, the development of Zimbabwe's agricultural sector – which is the backbone of the country's economy. Zimbabwe has experienced a cataclysmic meltdown of its economy and environmental conservation practices, especially since the turn of the millennium. During this period, the country has engaged in a politicisation of land that has resulted in widespread farm invasions and highly questionable economic and political decisions, especially in the years prior to the government of national unity (GNU) of 2008 onwards. It is my contention that decisions made by the government both before and after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 have had a negative impact on the national environmental conservation project in a number of different ways. In fact, both the colonial and post-independence governments failed the environmental conservation project of Zimbabwe, albeit in different ways.

The colonial government in what was formerly (Southern) Rhodesia can be praised for suggesting the need for environmental legislation, using monitoring techniques and conservation measures, and establishing the aforementioned natural resource management infrastructure. Nevertheless, this regime still had two major negative impacts on environmental conservation. First, it managed to create increased pressure on natural resources through the Land Tenure Act of 1930, which transferred land ownership from the majority to a minority. This increased the strain on the environment in countryside areas, thereby compromising the conservational capabilities of the rural communities. As Ribot (1999) and Mandondo (2000) note, colonial natural resource management policies resulted in over-centralisation because they were designed in the context of conquest and subjugation. Second, the colonial government hostilely rejected as backward all indigenous conservation practices and thinking rather than seeking to usefully combine local and modern scientific knowledge in the national conservation project. It failed to realise that in indigenous practices and philosophies of life lay forms of knowledge that subaltern people (Mignolo 2000) had used successfully for centuries to conserve their natural environment and to ensure social harmony between humans and all other life in the wider environment (Mawere and Kadenge 2010; Mawere 2013). With the advent of Western science with its nature-culture dichotomy, a “holistic” understanding of the environment was lost. Some species considered valuable by locals (e.g. edible insects) were judged to be less important by those who saw themselves as the masters of nature, which resulted in such entities being overlooked in the colonial government’s conservation agenda.

Upon independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government appeared to commit itself to rectifying the problems left behind by the colonial regime. There seemed to be a paradigmatic shift from state-centred control towards alternative conservation and natural resource approaches in which local people would play a central role (see Murphree 1991). In fact, in the 1980 “National Conservation Strategy”, the post-independence government vowed to halt the mounting land degradation and promote sustainable land use practices. While this was a positive gesture towards the conservation of all species, the postcolonial government – like its colonial predecessor – failed the national conservation project for two key reasons. First, the postcolonial government employed science as the sole tool for environmental conservation, thereby continuing to relegate local eco-knowledge to the periphery of national environmental conservation projects. This stance resulted in the continued disregard of those species, like forest insects, whose value and rights had not been acknowledged in the colonial government’s environmental conservation project. Even the most recent Zimbabwe Na-

tional Environmental Policy and Strategies (ZNEPS) is notably silent on the moral value and rights of the country's flora and fauna. Exclusively informed by science, ZNEPS thus discriminates against the other beings inhabiting the environment. It states that:

at species level, the country supports an estimated 4,440 vascular plant species, 196 mammal species, 672 bird species, 156 reptile species, 57 species of amphibians, 132 fish species and uncounted numbers of species in other groups. The diversity of microorganisms in particular is extremely poorly known. (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Management 2009: 7)

This current environment policy has no specific clause that provides for the protection of forest insects. As documented in the quote above, insect species are not well recognised despite the invaluable contribution that most of these insects make to human livelihood, social life and the ecosystem as a whole. We can only assume that insects, together with other small organisms, are those being referred to here as the “uncounted numbers of species in other groups.” Clearly some fauna and flora are considered more equal than others. One wonders if some entities in the “natural” environment are thus not seen as deserving to live and be treated as other species. It also remains highly questionable to assume that the species not mentioned in the ZNEPS are in no way helpful to the natural environment or human lives. The ZNEPS has thus failed to acknowledge the role of indigenous epistemologies in conservation. Put differently, the ZNEPS is opposed to the traditional conservation practices pursued by many local or rural people, for whom fauna and flora are viewed as “companions” and “participants” – as such, they are socially and morally acknowledged as meaningful entities.

Second, the farm invasions that began around 1999/2000 were characterised by the violation of the rights of both humans (especially the white commercial farmers) and other beings, as well as the scandalous exploitation of natural resources and the natural environment. In addition, the invaders disregarded the value of indigenous epistemologies and other social actors (e.g. forest insects). This led to an environmental conservation meltdown and the unimagined compromising of local sources of livelihood.

## Insects and Conservation Discourse

Though the practice of eating insects has been documented in nearly every part of the world (Durst 2010), the central place of some of these forest insects (e.g. *harurwa*) in forest conservation, social cohesion, economic networks and cultural preservation has not yet been sufficiently investigated in

the case of Zimbabwe. Yet the *harurwa* represent a natural endowment for a vast majority of rural Zimbabweans living in the south-eastern part of the country (particularly in the Norumedzo area) due to their monetary, medicinal, nutritional, religious and cultural significance, as well as their role in forest conservation. Raffles acknowledges that insects have been under-researched and under-estimated, commenting that:

long before our time, there were insects. For as long as we have been here, they have been there too. Wherever we have travelled, they have been there too. And still, we do not know them very well, not even the ones we are closest to [...]. Who are they, these beings so different from us and from each other? What do they do? What worlds do they make? What do we make of them? How do we live with them? How could we live with them differently? (Raffles 2012: 3)

*Harurwa* have thus far received little attention from scholars in Zimbabwe despite serving as a source of people's livelihood and having been (for several decades now) a factor in forest conservation in south-eastern Zimbabwe.

"Environment" has been defined differently across disciplines. In common usage, the term is often used as a synonym for "nature". This creates great conceptual confusion because the environment of a particular human group actually includes both cultural and biophysical elements (Rapaport 1979; Little 1999). This report thus uses the term as it is often used in environmental anthropology, namely to refer to "an explicit, active concern with the relationship between human groups and their respective cultural and biophysical elements" (Little 1999: 254). For this reason, "the environment is taken to mean the land, water and vegetation assets that are utilised either directly or indirectly to provide means of survival for human populations" (Ellis 2000: 117). Such environments have two major categories of resources: (i) those that can be utilised (normally) by the rural people through gathering and/or harvesting and (ii) those that are organised by human agency to produce managed outputs, as in pastoralism and farming systems (ibid.). This report focuses mainly on the former, examining networks and interactions between humans, the environment in general and insect species (*harurwa* in particular) (see Escobar 2008).

In south-eastern Zimbabwe and the Norumedzo area in particular the pivotal role of the *harurwa* in local environmental thought is evidenced in the rural administrative authorities' (consisting of the area's chiefs and headmen) decision to institutionalise the conservation of the Norumedzo *jiri* (forest/grove) and, in turn, the *harurwa*. Those who harm the *jiri* and/or exploit its resources without permission from the administrative authorities are reported by local *harurwa* policemen and subsequently tried and convicted by

a traditional court. Those found guilty are fined an amount set according to the gravity of the crime.

The religious and cultural significance of the *harurwa* and *jiri* is accentuated by (i) the wealth of indigenous knowledge and beliefs that exist around the natural preservation of this matrix (people, state, forests and *harurwa*) and (ii) the mysterious and often contradictory accounts regarding the origins of the *harurwa* (Maredza 1985; Makuku 1993; Nyathi 2005). There are numerous folktales amongst rural Zimbabweans in the south-east concerning the “sacredness” of *jiri* – specifically the disruption of the balance of the natural ecosystem. Practices like deforestation, using obscenities in the forests, smoking in the forests, setting the forests alight and the unauthorised and/or excessive exploitation of the non-timber produce of the forests are associated with the angering of ancestors (Mawere 2011) – which is believed to trigger misfortunes and have the potential to cause the extinction of the *harurwa*.

To unravel the complex nuances and subtleties that exist between humans, insects, forests and the state, attention should be paid to the economic flows, social interactions and networks in place between humans and *harurwa*, which illustrate how the latter help to conserve the ecosystem. This study thus offers critical epistemological reflections in that it questions the status quo. This allows us to understand the deep structural tensions and contradictions that exist in the current knowledge framework. It also helps us to avoid what Chimamanda Adichie (2009: 5) identifies as “the danger of a single story”, whereby we “overlook the many other stories”. This report examines how locally generated knowledge could be (i) legitimised and harnessed for environmental good, (ii) deployed in the practice of “symmetrical anthropology” (Latour 1993, 1999), a methodology that moves beyond the nature-culture divide and is open-ended, and (iii) used to advance a “soft” post-Humanities approach to conservation knowledge – an approach that “refuses the division of the world into subjects and objects, that is, into humans and things or creatures” (Green 2011: 5). Soft post-Humanities articulates and justifies the need for Zimbabwe’s national conservation project to rethink the ways in which Western scientific conservation strategies and indigenous conservation epistemologies might be jointly utilised so as to sustainably enrich each other, thereby closing these theoretical and research gaps.

## Rethinking Conservation and Knowledge Studies: A Quest for Border Thinking

The conservation contestations and the crisis in Zimbabwe are centred around issues of knowledge and, in particular, the kind of practices that can be successfully used to ease the tapestry of problems in which Zimbabwean



conservation finds itself. This is a contest between indigenous epistemologies and local knowledge on the one hand and Western science on the other. While the state – through the ZNEPS – favours Western science in its conservation projects, so-called traditionalists advocate conservation strategies informed by indigenous epistemologies. There is no doubt that both the Zimbabwean state and traditionalists are fundamentalists: both want their respective positions exclusively considered at the expense of contrary views on conservation.

Under such circumstances, the conservation crisis in Zimbabwe will not be resolved unless the whole debate is reframed. To overcome this, I argue for border thinking (Mignolo 2000; Grosfoguel 2006a, 2006b, 2011) – or what Helen Verran (2011) calls “generative dialogue” – which focuses on sustainable dialogue between diverse epistemologies and forms of knowledge, responding “to both hegemonic and marginal fundamentalisms” (Grosfoguel 2011: 2). This approach goes beyond the rigid binary system (Losonczy 1993; Escobar 2008: 116) of conservation fundamentalists, a polarisation that established such divisions as nature versus culture and science versus indigenous knowledge. Highlighting that such dichotomies limit our conservation knowledge and make us vulnerable to the “danger of a single story”, I argue that inasmuch as science alone has failed to solve Zimbabwe’s environmental conservation crisis, indigenous epistemologies are also bound to fail if they are used to the exclusion of science.

On the one hand, the global environmental crisis we are facing today is a result of science’s failure to deal with all the problems related to environmental conservation, including the lack of commitment to focus on the conservation of species like the *harumva*. On the other hand, in many of those rural areas where the community members rely solely on indigenous epistemologies, cases of deforestation and other environment malpractices have also been reported (Mawere 2010). The failure of both indigenous conservation epistemologies and expert science conservation methodologies – when used in isolation from each other – shows that there is a need for conservationists from each side to be equally critical of the two perspectives and to discover ways in which to integrate the two to promote sustainable conservation.

The Norumedzo conservation case cited here uses both expert science conservation methodologies (enacted via the scientifically trained environment monitors deployed in the Norumedzo area) and indigenous epistemologies (enforced by local people through traditional leaders such as chiefs and headmen) in the conservation of the Norumedzo *jiri*. This resonates with Escobar’s (2008) argument that there is a need for the global (a science which sees itself as universal) and the local (indigenous epistemologies) to

work hand-in-hand in order to generate the interest of and mutually strengthen all participants in conservation. This could form the basis of alternative conservation frameworks. This understanding argues for a dialogue between diverse critical epistemologies towards a pluriversal – as opposed to a universal – world (Grosfoguel 2011), as is required if we are to successfully deal with the environmental problems that the world is currently facing.

## Conclusion

The challenges that we face today regarding environmental conservation and the pressures on biodiversity can best be addressed with the close coupling of approaches from both scientific and indigenous epistemological systems. An undisciplined response is required in the rethinking of conservation and knowledge studies. However, as Shepherd and Haber (2012: 2) argue,

in order to discuss undisciplined responses and modes of scholarship, we need to originate a vocabulary and a set of ideas, and in order to do this we need to take a short detour through a case study drawn from our own research on the history of ideas associated with the discipline [of anthropology].

In light of this, I have considered and presented here how the Norumedzo case study is ideal for bolstering the argument that conservation research and intervention should integrate this new comprehensive perspective of undisciplinarity and border thinking to bring together science and indigenous epistemologies. This revised approach will be able to break down the traditional dichotomies, which still impose epistemological borders between nature and culture and which continue to conceal the additional value of the social and cultural dimensions of conservation. In the Zimbabwean context (i.e. a postcolonial context), questions of conservation need to be reframed as part of a broader set of questions concerned with knowledge studies. In this particular setting, “as the inheritors of both colonial violence and disciplinary entitlement, we have no alternative but to respond through acts of indiscipline” (ibid.: 8) if we are to find ways in which Western science and indigenous epistemologies can be reconciled as part of the attempt to achieve sustainable conservation in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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### Umweltschutz in Zimbabwe – eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Diskurs zur "Bewahrung der Umwelt" ist ausgesprochen dynamisch und hat in den Umweltwissenschaften und in der Ethnologie zu ausufernden Kontroversen geführt. Angesichts des schwer abzugrenzenden Gegenstandsbereichs und der unterschiedlichen Interpretationen innerhalb der verschiedenen Disziplinen sollte eine schärfere Konturierung des Begriffs seine konkreten Erscheinungsformen und seine Anwendbarkeit in spezifischen Kontexten einbeziehen – insbesondere innerhalb der Umweltwissenschaften und der Ethnologie/Kulturanthropologie. In Zimbabwe stützt sich der öffentliche Naturschutz bevorzugt auf wissenschaftliche Ansätze, die im Westen entstanden sind, und schenkt Praktiken der Umweltbewahrung lokaler Bevölkerungen, die auf ihren hergebrachten Wissenssystemen beruhen, wenig Beachtung. Dieser Beitrag stellt daher einen Versuch dar, den Umweltschutz in Zimbabwe neu zu denken, und zwar unter Bezugnahme auf das Norumedzo-Gebiet im Südosten Zimbabwes. Es wurde deshalb gewählt, weil hier die sehr geschätzten und schmackhaften *Harumva* (essbare Stinkwanzen, *Encosternum delegorguei*) gefunden werden können. Weil diese Insekten als „Akteure“ gesehen werden und sowohl im westlichen als auch im lokalen

Denken einen hohen Stellenwert genießen, war der Umweltschutz in dieser Region ausgesprochen erfolgreich. In diesem Sinne unterstützt der vorliegende Beitrag die Argumente Walter Mignolos und Ramon Grosfuguels, die dafür plädieren, zur Bewahrung der Umwelt auf kritisches und die Wissenssysteme überschreitendes Denken zu setzen.

**Schlagwörter:** Zimbabwe, Naturschutz, Umwelt/Ökologie, Ethnologie, Kulturanthropologie, Methode