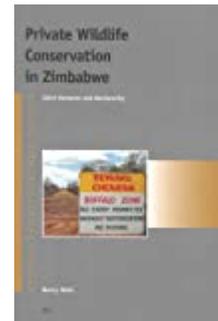




Harry Wels. *Private Wildlife Conservation in Zimbabwe: Joint Ventures and Reciprocity.* Leiden: Brill, 2004. xiii + 242 pp. \$48.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-04-13697-7.



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Wels's book centers on processes of reciprocal exchange between joint venture partners in privately owned and managed conservation schemes. This is an especially important theme in environmental management because of the proliferation of privately owned and managed wildlife ventures that claim to involve partnerships with local communities. Intellectually, the book uses notions of gift giving and reciprocity to explore the relationships between the Save Valley Conservancy and surrounding communities in southeastern Zimbabwe.

This is, in short, an interesting and very stimulating book, with a wealth of detail about the complex networks involved in privatized wildlife conservation. The book is set against the backdrop of the deteriorating political climate in Zimbabwe. This political crisis is often presented as being about the controversial land question which resulted in racially unequal land distribution under colonial rule, but the book by Wels presents a more sophisticated view of the land question, pointing to struggles within communities as well as the political objectives of the Mugabe regime as explanations for the "Zimbabwe crisis." My only criticism of this book relates to this, and is an issue which is beyond the control of the author, or any writer on Zimbabwe for that matter: events have quickly overtaken the material in the book, which means it loses some of its freshness because the reader

is constantly thinking, "I wonder what happened next." This aside, the book has a number of important and more general points to make about the potentials and pitfalls of privatized wildlife conservation and its impacts on the companies and communities involved.

In particular, the book unpacks notions of what reciprocal exchange might mean in a context where private wildlife conservancies have been established against a history of externally imposed fixed boundaries. As Wels insightfully points out "the fence became the white signature on the land" (p. 54). These fixed boundaries, around nation-states, regions and (more crucially for this study) around privately owned ranches and national parks, worked against indigenous views of more flexible and socially constructed boundaries. In order for conservancies to survive as wildlife conservation areas they require "game fences," to prevent the movement of wildlife onto farmland. According to Wels, these fences constitute a barrier to developing genuine reciprocal relations between communities and conservancies in both physical and symbolic terms. The erection of fences, in a sense, imposed a slice of wilderness in the middle of densely populated areas. This then created a sense amongst local communities that fences had written the message "white land only" onto the landscape. This added to and further developed the stereotypes and mistrust between the

communities and the Conservancy.

The important point this book makes is a broader argument about the capacity for privatized wildlife conservation to act as some kind of “cure all” solution: one that neatly pays for conservation in a situation where the state cannot or will not fund it, so that it can secure genuine community participation and involvement as well as being able to deal with issues surrounding questions of who has the right to own land. Wels makes it clear that

communities and conservancies cannot be seen as single homogenous entities, but rather as an amalgam of different interest groups that shift and change in response to the context they find themselves in. He provides a very detailed analysis of the multiple *reciprocities* in conservancies, and as such this book will have wide appeal. It will be of interest to development planners and environmental managers, as well as academics interested in sustainability, the politics of conservation and broader issues of trust and reciprocity.

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