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## Fostering indigenous stewardship: Towards decolonizing natural resource management in southern Africa

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### Abstract

Community-based conservation (CBC) gained prominence in the 1960s at the end of Western colonisation of Africa as resource-rich former colonies sought to depart from Western approaches to natural resource conservation. The Western approach predominantly separated humans from nature, often marginalising indigenous communities and undermining their agency over resource management. Decades later, Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) schemes pioneered in Southern Africa are criticised as being 'neo-colonialist', 'green colonialist', and 'captured by elites' in nature.

In this study, we seek to analyse challenges hindering equitable distribution of benefits from natural resource conservation among local communities as well as the communities' capacity to conserve natural resources. To this end, we collected data from four CBNRM sites in Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Namibia from October 2023 to March 2024. We conducted key informant interviews with natural resource management experts from academia, government, NGOs, and local conservation groups. Additionally, we obtained observational data from attending two annual general meetings of conservation groups in Namibia and Botswana during our fieldwork.

We find that communities across the three countries perceive CBNRM as being dominated by their governments and private companies. Additionally, they perceive benefits from conservation efforts as accruing mostly to private companies, the majority of which are operated by Europeans, while the communities shoulder the costs of conservation through high incidents of human-wildlife conflicts. The communities generally see themselves as having limited influence over the distribution of conservation benefits. Additionally, the communities expressed worries about the potential loss of their livelihoods should European countries ban imports of trophies from licensed hunting from the three countries.

Our findings underscore the importance of adopting a decolonial approach and empowering communities to participate actively in conservation efforts in the region. Measures such as integrating indigenous knowledge in conservation efforts and traditional practices such as the bow and arrow for hunting; sharing gains from conservation more equitably; actively engaging communities in addressing human-wildlife conflicts and poaching; and increasing community operation of hunting ventures and safaris could improve local agency in resource conservation. A bottom-up approach could foster synergies between local communities and other stakeholders in CBNRM.

**Keywords:** Agency, CBNRM, community-based conservation, decolonisation, southern Africa