

**Van Beemen, O. 2024. *Ondernemers in het wild: Het ontluisterende verhaal van een club witte weldoeners in Afrika*. Amsterdam: Prometheus. ISBN 9789044644883. €29.00. (also available in French & German)**

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The book *Ondernemers in het wild: Het ontluisterende verhaal van een club witte weldoeners in Afrika* (meaning: 'Entrepreneurs in the wilderness: The disconcerting story of a group of white philanthropists in Africa') by investigative journalist Olivier van Beemen centers on an eye-catching case study about conservation giant African Parks. The work contributes to the political ecology topics of neocolonialism, the neoliberalization of nature (luxury tourism, philanthrocapitalism), and green militarization as it unpacks the ideology, activities and struggles of African Parks.

The book starts with a history of African Parks and how this conservation NGO rapidly became the biggest conservation actor in Africa, currently managing 22 parks in 12 countries, while showing an enormous drive to expand. African Parks was started in 2003 and largely financed by late Dutch businessman and philanthropist Paul Fentener van Vlissingen. Fentener van Vlissingen's family company *Steenkolen Handels Vereniging* (SHV) made its millions with coal, oil, and gas before it later diversified its business across seven companies. One of these, Makro Warehouse Clubs, was set on fire four times in the Netherlands between 1985 and 1987 by anti-Apartheid activists because SHV refused to join the boycott of the South African Apartheid regime. The ideology behind the family business was replicated by Fentener van Vlissingen for African Parks: his personal dream to protect iconic African wildlife was based on the slogan 'a business approach to conservation.' This 'business approach' might have worked well for SHV, but Van Beemen shows that it does not suit conservation well: African Parks is blinded by this deeply internalized ideology, so much so that any critique on the organization's functioning or the consequences thereof is either ignored or counter-attacked. Their stonewall collaboration with journalist Van Beemen, and his troublesome relationship with African Parks becomes a recurring theme in the book. Van Beemen invites African Parks to collaborate on his project, gets banned, and is forbidden access to a national park, although he was finally allowed to interview African Parks' CEO Peter Fearnhead in Johannesburg. These challenges indicate that the reporting was seen as a threat by African Parks.

Political ecologists working on conservation in Africa will not be surprised to learn about racism, human rights violations and a neocolonial drift to expand at the expense of peoples living in and around protected areas (Brockington *et al.*, 2008; Kepe, 2009; Koot *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, militarization, leading to torture and rape, is something well-known among scholars (Duffy *et al.*, 2019; Marijnen & Verweijen, 2016), as are implementing top-down solutions by elites (celebrities and wealthy donors) based on business designs framed as sustainable (Koot, 2021). What Van Beemen contributes is insights into the institutional workings of a powerful NGO, and how they hardly seem to know what they are doing and what the consequences of their actions are. The initial idea to use a business approach to make the parks financially sustainable was mainly based on the assumption that luxury tourism, trophy hunting, and animal relocations will become large income generators for the parks. This model reflects the outdated and naïve belief in the trickle-down effect and that job creation automatically benefits local populations who will then be 'developed' and support conservation.

If African Parks had paid attention to issues that the World Wildlife Fund for Nature or the Peace Parks Foundation had run into over the last few decades (e.g. Büscher & Ramutsindela, 2016; FPP, 2020; Warren & Baker, 2019), this could have prevented many of the problems, including local people suffering horrible atrocities. Instead, after their initial 'business approach' failed, they have continued to rely even more on wealthy philanthropists and international government funds. African Parks' funding apparatus—and thus the urge to present good results, disregard any problems and build up an expert reputation—became the core of this approach, in which financial self-support was not achieved, let alone social or ecological sustainability. Meanwhile, African Parks is mostly concerned about the potential reputational damage Van Beemen's book might create. They hold him responsible for potential damage and lost income, and they keep repeating that his book "is replete with hundreds of factual inaccuracies and a similar number of misleading statements, which in our view reflect the author's own prejudices" (AP, 2024). However, African Parks does not specify what exactly

these are. Instead, they disregard over 300 interviews as "a handful," categorizing local hunting practices as "unfettered" and "illegal" (AP, 2024).

One small concern about the book is the lack of positioning of the African Parks saga in broader debates and literature. Comparisons with other large conservation NGOs and how they were involved in similar issues, in and outside of Africa, are lacking. Through this omission, the book misses the opportunity to acquaint a larger audience with these important issues as relevant to broader conservation contexts. One additional chapter based on literature and media could have achieved this positioning (e.g. by using material such as Chapin, 2004; Warren & Baker, 2019). Having said that, the book reads like a novel that could be followed by a Part Two, for two reasons. First, the donors' responsibilities are crucial and need further investigation. In the last chapter, Van Beemen explains that he asked African Parks' donors for reactions to his investigations. Their first responses can be described as rather tame and while some donors, especially the private ones, ignore Van Beemen's findings—and thus take no responsibility—others say they will investigate further. Reading the book would be a good start for them. Second, a follow up about African Parks' response to this book could prove insightful as we get a glimpse of the outcomes only at the end of the book. Today, intimidation in the world of conservation has become common practice (Guerisoli *et al.*, 2023; Igoe *et al.*, 2009; Koot *et al.*, 2025; Sridhar, 2022) and therefore, it feels as if the Van Beemen/African Parks saga was only a beginning.

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