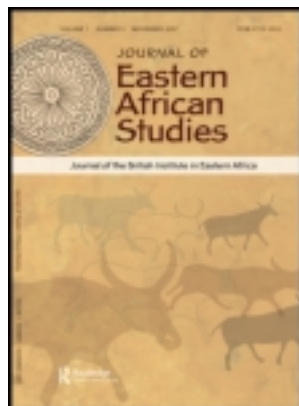


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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Eastern African Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjea20>

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Published online: 22 Feb 2011.

To cite this article: David Turton (2011) Wilderness, wasteland or home? Three ways of imagining the Lower Omo Valley, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5:1, 158-176, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2011.544546](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.544546)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.544546>

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Wilderness, wasteland or home? Three ways of imagining the Lower Omo Valley

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(Received 6 April 2010; final version received 11 July 2010)

Since the 1960s, the lower Omo Valley of southwestern Ethiopia has been imagined by conservationists as a “wilderness”, in need of urgent protection from the damaging impact of human activity. For state officials it has been an unproductive wasteland, inhabited by violence prone “nomads”, in need of the political control and civilizing influence of the state. For local people it is home, a place from which they derive not only their livelihoods but also their sense of individual and group identity. Both the conservationists’ and the state’s ways of imagining the lower Omo are fundamentally pictorial, implying the disengaged standpoint of an external viewer. For local people, it is a “lived” environment, which they perceive and experience in functional rather than formal terms. Since the setting up of the Omo and Mago National Parks in the 1960s and 1970s, conservation, linked to state coercion, has helped to advance the state’s project of control and revenue extraction in its southwestern periphery. New opportunities for the state to advance its political objectives in the lower Omo are now emerging, in the shape of hydro-electric dams and commercial plantations, which are not, however, compatible with the conservationists’ goal of wilderness protection. It is suggested that the three ways of imagining the lower Omo identified in the article can be understood as the legitimating ideologies of three competing place-making projects, of unequal power, carried on at three different spatial levels.

Keywords: landscape; place; conservation; state building; Ethiopia.

Two closely related approaches to the study of environmental history have been much discussed in recent years, across a wide range of disciplines. One of these comes from the field of “landscape studies”, a fundamental assumption of which is that landscape is “socially constructed”. The historian, Simon Schama, puts it as follows: “it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape” and it is social memory, or “the inherited tradition” which makes the difference to our “shaping perception”.¹ The power of a social construct comes from the fact that its constructedness is hidden, even from those whose interests it serves. This is a fundamental assumption of another wide-ranging field of study which has become established since the 1980s under the name “political ecology”. According to Paul Robbins, the hallmark of a political ecology approach is to look for the explanation of local phenomena in broader systems, to treat ecological systems as “power laden” and to adopt an explicitly normative approach “rather than one that claims the

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objectivity of disinterest”.² It follows that understanding the history of the interaction between human activity and the environment in any particular area is a matter of understanding both local ecological processes and broader political ones. Even when we have achieved as objective and complete an understanding of local ecological processes as possible, therefore, we still need to explain the often discordant, competing and more or less influential perceptions of these processes by different interest groups, operating at different spatial levels, from the local to the global.³

In this article I describe three ways of imagining the lower Omo Valley: as wilderness, as wasteland and as home. Each relates to a different spatial level, respectively global, national and local and each is the construct of a different interest group, respectively conservationists, state officials and local people. I argue that the concept of “place making”, or “locality production”, understood as a universal social activity which always involves the exercise of power in relation to other locality producing projects,⁴ enables us to understand these different ways of imagining the lower Omo as the legitimating ideologies of three competing locality producing projects. Each of these projects aims to make the lower Omo into a “meaningful location”,⁵ according to the aims, interests and assumptions of a specific group.

The groups I identify are clearly constructs of my own, based on bold and possibly foolhardy generalizations. First, I take as my paradigmatic example of “local people” the Mursi, amongst whom I have been carrying out anthropological fieldwork over the past 40 years. It would be interesting to know whether, and how far, what I describe as the “Mursi” way of perceiving their surroundings differs from that of their neighbours. But even to speak of the “Mursi way” is, of course, a huge generalization which assumes that there are no significant individual differences in the way members of the same group experience and think about the world. Clearly there are, and the same must be true for those who work within state bureaucracies. But it is also true that culturally and institutionally specific interests and assumptions are an important determinant of individual and group behaviour. In speaking of the Ethiopian state’s way of perceiving the lower Omo I am assuming that those who work within its institutions are influenced by a common set of assumptions based on the sedentary perspective of a plough cultivating, highland peasantry and the sedentarizing perspective of the nation state. And third, in talking about “conservationism” I am clearly not representing the views of all conservationists. I am referring to a particular brand of conservationism which has been highly influential in the history of wildlife conservation in Africa, and which is based on the “environmental paradigm”⁶ often referred to as “fortress conservation”.

Saving the wilderness

The establishment of the Omo and Mago National Parks, in 1966 and 1978 respectively, was inspired by the fantasy of non-human nature, of uninhabited wilderness and of unspoilt natural beauty which we owe to the writers and artists of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European romanticism.⁷ But although based on a fantasy, the conviction that “true” nature is nature without people has had terrifying real-world consequences. Some of the best known African national parks were created by the forced removal of a resident human population, following the example of what is often regarded as the world’s first national park, Yellowstone, established in the American West in the nineteenth century.

The movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas followed hard on the heels of the final Indian wars, in which the prior human inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved onto reservations. The myth of the wilderness as “virgin” uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God’s own creation.⁸

Evicting people from their homes to give physical form to an imagined “natural” wilderness could be seen as the conservationist’s equivalent of the nationalist’s strategy of “ethnic cleansing”, designed to give physical form to an imagined, ethnically pure nation. Like ethnicity, wilderness may be imagined, but it is far from imaginary.

The power of the wilderness concept to evoke an emotional response in the Western observer is evident in the descriptions of the lower Omo landscape by foreign consultants who advised on its potential as a wildlife reserve in the 1960s and 1970s. Leslie Brown, one of two UNESCO consultants who recommended the establishment of a national park in the lower Omo in 1965, described it as having “a special quality of remoteness; one *feels* that not only is Man not there in any significant numbers, but that he never has been there”.⁹ It is, he reports “almost completely uninhabited – though Surma poachers have infiltrated in some numbers in the last year”.¹⁰ Ten years later, John Stephenson and Akinori Mizuno described the lower Omo as Ethiopia’s “most unspoiled wilderness”, an area “practically free of human activity” which had “retained its primeval character from ages past”.¹¹ Another foreign adviser, Melvin Bolton, was similarly inspired, while recognizing the drawbacks for “solitude seekers” in developing this wilderness for tourists. In a book entitled “Ethiopian Wildlands”, which records his experiences during a survey of the country’s wildlife resources in 1968 and 1969, he writes as follows about a trip to the Mago Valley:

Setting up the area for visitors would itself have an unavoidable impact on the valley. For those who value such things (and the solitude-seekers are always the first to lose out) the feeling of remoteness could disappear for a start.¹²

Local people, meanwhile, whose environmental knowledge and systems of natural resource management had sustained this supposed “wildland” for centuries in a state fit for the Western “solitude seeker”, are mentioned, as in Brown’s comment quoted above, only as “poachers”.

At least eight different groups, mainly of agro-pastoralists, live in and around the Omo and Mago parks. Their physical removal from within the park boundaries has often been proposed, but no systematic attempt has yet been made to achieve this. Instead, their numbers have been systematically under-estimated; they are normally referred to as living “around” or “between” rather than *in* the parks; when resident populations within the park boundaries are acknowledged, they are often described as having recently “encroached” on the parks, whereas the truth is exactly the opposite; and these fictions have been invested with a kind of legitimacy by the maps produced by state institutions. Stephenson and Mizuno, for example, recommended the forced resettlement of an estimated 1750 Mursi whom they described as living “between” the Omo and Mago parks, on the grounds that “the Omo and Mago will lose their value as national parks if vested human interests are permitted to exist

between them”.¹³ In fact there were then approximately 6000 Mursi, living both within and between the parks, a number which is now nearer 10,000. More than half of their territory lay within the park boundaries, as it still does. This includes all their most valuable agricultural land along the Omo and Mago rivers, where they practise flood-retreat cultivation, and their most valuable dry-season grazing areas in the Elma Valley (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the fiction that “Mursiland” consists of a narrow strip of territory between the Omo and the western boundary of the Mago park continues to be propagated by the official map of the Park which is issued to tourists (Figure 2).

By not acting on Stephenson’s and Mizuno’s recommendations on resettlement, the Ethiopian government probably lost its last chance of implementing a policy of forced removal from the Omo and Mago parks with the kind of impunity that other African governments had enjoyed only a few years earlier.¹⁴ By the 1980s, forced evictions in the name of conservation had become sufficiently problematic for arguments linking conservation with poverty reduction to have assumed the status of conventional wisdom. It was now compulsory for conservation organizations to use the rhetoric of “community conservation” in their public pronouncements on the future of wildlife conservation in Africa. This is reflected in the feasibility study for what came to be known as the “National Parks Rehabilitation in Southern Ethiopia Project”, which got under way in 1995 with funding from the European Community. The purpose of the project, which was expected to continue for five years, was to upgrade not only the Omo and Mago parks but also a third, Nech Sar, near Arba Minch. It is admitted in the feasibility study that the project would not succeed without the goodwill and cooperation of local people and it is therefore recommended that “revenue sharing with local communities” should be introduced and that they should be given priority in opportunities for employment.¹⁵ Once again, no mention is made of people living in, rather than “around”, the Omo and Mago parks, but an undated planning document stated that one of the first objectives of the project would be to resettle people “who have settled in the parks”. This objective was not achieved and the project came to a premature end in 1998, after a twelve-month extension of its two-year “preliminary phase”.¹⁶

Ten years later, another attempt to use foreign money and expertise to rehabilitate the Omo National Park also came to an untimely end. In January 2006 the park was taken over in a 25-year “public–private partnership” agreement by a Netherlands based not-for-profit multinational company, African Parks Foundation (APF).¹⁷ APF announced no plans for resettlement in the Omo, and declared its willingness to work with local people in a “conservation partnership”. Its policy, however, was to provide them with inducements to ensure their compliance with company-imposed rules restricting access to vital subsistence resources. Like the EU funded project before it, this was conventional fortress conservation, “retrofitted”¹⁸ with largely symbolic “protected area outreach” activities¹⁹ which it was hoped would persuade local people to support a model of conservation which saw no place for them in nature. Two years after taking over the Omo park, APF announced its withdrawal from its management agreement, blaming lack of government support, difficulties in obtaining external funding, the “complexities and challenges” of managing community relations, and the unjustified criticisms it was receiving from human rights organizations.²⁰

One might have expected that repeated failure to build successfully on the “Yellowstone model” in the Omo Valley would have discredited this approach to

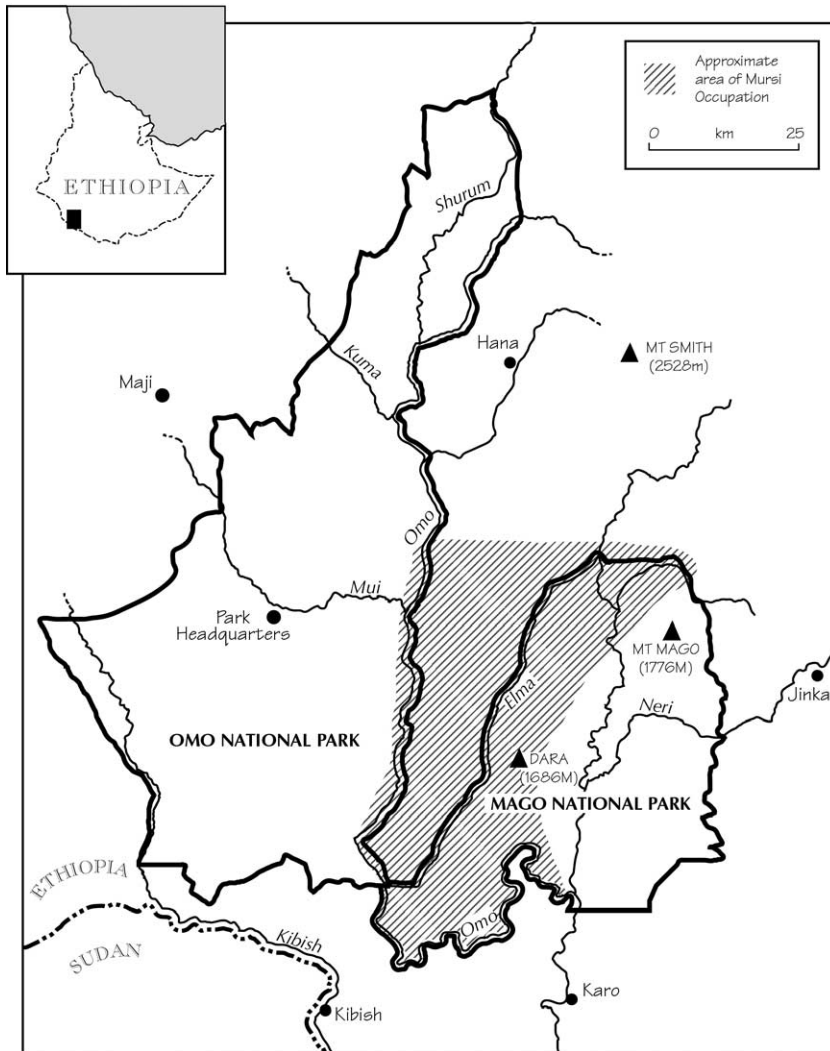


Figure 1. The Omo and Mago National Parks, showing the approximate area of Mursi occupation.

national park development amongst Ethiopian wildlife staff and their foreign advisers, or at least induced some re-thinking of the basic tenets of fortress conservation. But it is, of course, a well-known characteristic of environmental policy narratives that their popularity can survive “strong empirical evidence against their story lines”.²¹ One reason for this is that the activities which sustain them tend to attract and create elite interest groups,²² made up of politicians, donors, consultants and “experts” of various kinds. It is striking, for example, how reliant the Ethiopian wildlife department has always been on foreign advisers and consultants, many of whom gained their previous professional experience in East Africa. Amongst those already mentioned, Leslie Brown was former Director of Agriculture for Kenya and John Stephenson was former Chief Park Warden of Tanzania’s first National Park, Serengeti. The first wildlife conservation adviser to the Ethiopian government was

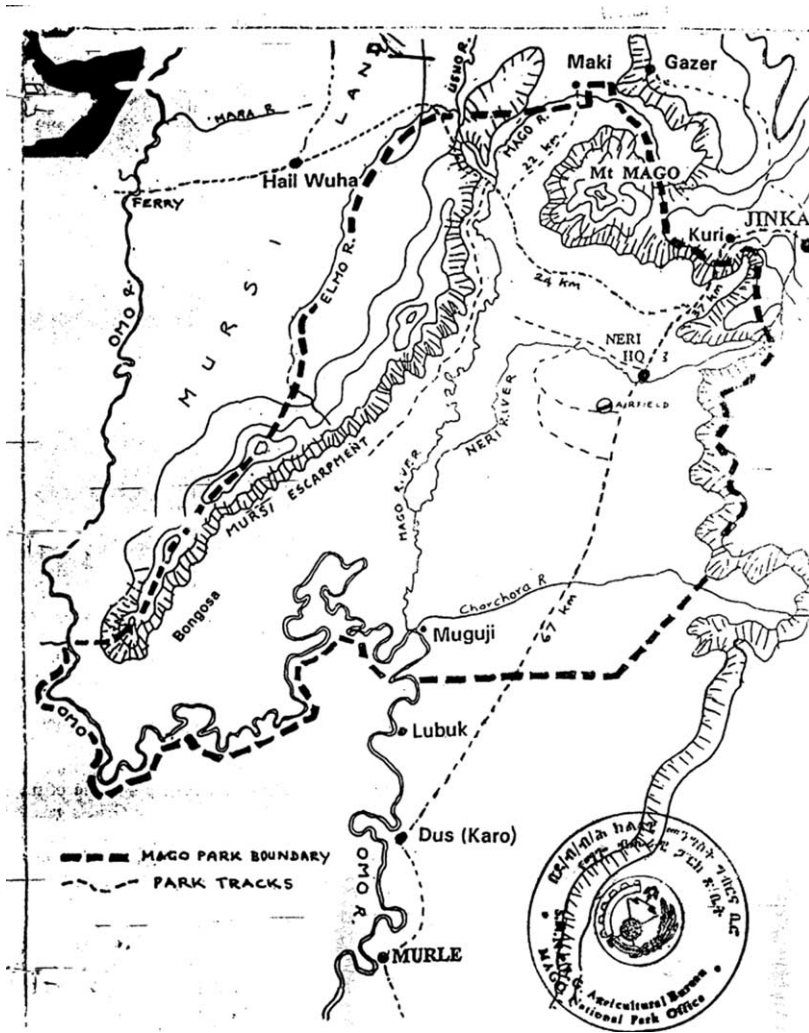


Figure 2. Official map of the Mago National Park.

John Blower, former Chief Game Warden of Uganda,²³ and the first warden of the Omo National Park was George Brown, Leslie's brother, who had served as a District Commissioner in the Northern Frontier Province of Kenya before independence. Foreign advisers with East African experience have continued to play a key role in formulating Ethiopian conservation policy right up to the present. The most important of the second generation of advisers was J.C. Hillman, who worked in Ethiopia from 1983 to 1992. With a PhD in conservation biology from the University of Nairobi, his appointment also reflected the increased influence, since the 1980s, of the scientific expert and professional ecologist in African wildlife conservation. His two-volume *Compendium of Wildlife Conservation Information for Ethiopia* remains the most comprehensive source available on Ethiopian wildlife resources and protected areas.²⁴

For a policy narrative to become entrenched in state institutions, however, it needs more than an elite interest group, made up of people with a broadly similar

training, outlook and experience. It must also be seen by politicians and government officials as a means to advance the political objectives of the state. This brings us to the way the Omo lowlands have been imagined from the vantage point of central government since they first became part of Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century, and to the ambivalent relationship between conservation and the state.

Building the state

To consider the relationship between conservation and the state is to invite the drawing of another parallel between conservation and nationalism. The sociologist Zigmunt Bauman describes the inter-dependence of nation and state as follows.

And so it happened that states and nations could not live without each other. Nations needed states to forge the “locals” into nationals.... On the other hand, the state needed a nation – so that it could demand discipline in the name of sentiment, conscience and patriotic duty.... Indeed, a perfect marriage, one made in heaven.²⁵

Although not as perfectly matched as this, conservation and the state are undoubtedly well suited to each other. Conservationists, like nationalists, need the state for its powers of coercion – in the case of conservationists, for its ability to demarcate protected areas and enforce restrictions on their use. For the state, this provides a convenient way of extending its political control to hitherto relatively unadministered parts of its territory, with no apparent political motive. Some have suggested that the mutual attraction between conservation and the state accounts for the rapid growth of national parks in post-World War II colonial East Africa.²⁶ But for the state, this is not so much a marriage made in heaven as a marriage of convenience, which may come under strain as more effective and attractive options become available for it to achieve its objectives of control and revenue extraction.

The lower Omo became part of the Ethiopian state in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the historic kingdom of Abyssinia extended its reach southwards to establish the current international borders of Ethiopia with Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan. The physical, climatic and cultural conditions of the Abyssinian centre, with its mountain ranges, heavy rainfall, Christian tradition and plough cultivating peasantry, contrast markedly with those of its hot, dry, lowland periphery, inhabited mainly by pastoralists. This contrast has dominated the process of Ethiopian state building to this day. Viewed from the centre, the lowland periphery was seen as a wilderness, not in the sense given to that word by European Romanticism but in the earlier sense of “a waste or desolate region of any kind” or “a tract of solitude and savageness” (Oxford English Dictionary). The Abyssinian soldier-settlers who followed the armies of the Emperor Menelik II into the Omo Lowlands, saw themselves faced, like the seventeenth-century Puritan settlers in New England, with a “wild, untamed landscape, a savage howling wilderness”,²⁷ where no recognizable imprint of civilization had been left by the local inhabitants. They saw it above all as dangerous and threatening – a chaotic, disease ridden and unproductive tract of land, inhabited by anarchic and violence-prone “nomads”. But in the Baco and Maji highlands, on either side of the valley, they found not only climatic and environmental conditions they were used to but also settled agricultural populations with familiar social structures which they could readily incorporate into their own system of expropriation and control. The lowlands were another matter: they made

no attempt to settle in this “desert”, nor to use it for anything other than hunting, especially of elephant and rhinoceros, and raiding the local population for slaves and livestock.

The result was that, even after the formal demarcation of Ethiopia’s international borders at the turn of the nineteenth century, the *de facto* southern boundary of the state reached no further than the edge of the highland periphery. Beyond this line was a wide frontier zone, a “fringe periphery”²⁸ only nominally incorporated into the Ethiopian state, a zone of sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent interaction between different groups of lowland herders, as well as between them and highland agriculturalists. Both kinds of interaction of course had long pre-dated the drawing of formal international boundaries in the area, but once this had occurred, the frontier zone also became a zone of interaction, and struggle, between society and the state. For the agro-pastoralists of the lower Omo this struggle did not take the form of direct confrontation, since the state has always been too powerful for them to contemplate this. Rather, it took the form of avoidance, both active, by literally getting out of the way of the state when necessary, and passive, by emphasizing and promoting patterns of behaviour that made the exercise of state control more difficult, such as mobility and an egalitarian political ethos.²⁹ But avoidance only works when the state is relatively weak or (which is to say the same thing) when there are still spaces within its political boundaries where state control does not reach. For much of the last century, this was the situation in the Lower Omo. It has only been over the last 40 years or so that the Ethiopian state has begun to establish the kind of control over the lower Omo region which allows us to speak realistically of state incorporation.

That aspect of lowland society which the state found it most difficult to accommodate was mobility. It was not just that regular seasonal movements were a practical necessity for the agro-pastoral peoples of the lower Omo, but that the very *idea* of movement was a defining feature of what it meant to be Bodi, Mursi, Nyangatom, Daasanach etc. – and even of what it meant to be human. The Mursi, for example, saw themselves as a people who were always “looking for a cool place”,³⁰ a place with well-watered grassland for cattle herding and riverside forest for cultivation. Their “land of dreams”³¹ was ahead of them: it was not a place they had left behind, but a place they would never reach. In a sense, they *were* movement. This is what Tim Ingold calls wayfaring: the wayfarer “has no final destination, for wherever he is, and so long as life goes on, there is somewhere further he can go.”³²

To be on a journey towards a destination which is in principle unreachable implies an open-ended, expansive way of imagining space. It implies that one is looking out towards the horizon from wherever one happens to be on the earth’s surface, rather than looking down, from an unchanging, imagined vantage point, on a bounded, mapable territory. It is a way of imagining space which flies in the face of the sedentarizing principle upon which the nation state is built. It could be said that the most profound impact of state incorporation on the Mursi in the past few years has come, not from restrictions placed on their actual movements, which are anyway quite limited and circumscribed, but from the closing down of possibilities for future movement: the horizon is coming closer. When the politico-ritual leader of the northern Mursi, Komorakora, said in a public meeting in 1996, “Our land has shrunk”,³³ he did not mean that the actual terrain they occupied had become smaller but that paths for future movement had been blocked by state encroachment. Against this background, the establishment of national parks in Ethiopia’s lowland

periphery in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when it was taking its first real steps towards nation-statehood, was an effective means of state building, for three main reasons.

First, it involved the drawing of boundaries around areas to which local people would be denied access and, conversely, other areas within which they would be confined – a process which Robbins calls “the territorialisation of conservation space”.³⁴ A vital part of any state-building project is to create a space in which complex landscapes and patterns of human occupation and use are simplified, made legible and mapped. A good example of this “hegemonic planning mentality” of the state³⁵ is the official map of the Mago National Park referred to earlier (Figure 2). This shows how a map can be used to create a simplified “virtual” world, more in accordance with the administrative and bureaucratic aims and objectives of the state than the awkward, complex and stubborn reality of the “real” world. And although this map did not physically remove the Mursi from the park, it opened the way for this by turning them into illegal encroachers on it. Second, conservation, linked to state control and coercion, offered opportunities for the centre to extract revenue from local resources that could go directly into the state’s coffers, through the development of tourism. And third, all these activities, including the potential forced resettlement of populations, could be justified by the overriding imperative of helping to save the world’s biological heritage.³⁶ The resettlement of the Mursi may yet still happen, but if it does, it will probably be more to achieve the government’s long-term political objective of bringing about the “phased voluntary sedentarization” of all Ethiopian pastoralists “along the banks of the major rivers”³⁷ than to fulfil the conservationist’s dream of an “unspoiled wilderness”.

The creation of national parks has been one of the most effective strategies of state building in the lower Omo to date. Today, however, other strategies are emerging which will allow the state rapidly to advance its project of political control and revenue extraction but which are not compatible with the conservationists’ project of wilderness protection. All the indications are that the next few years will see the development of large-scale irrigated plantations in the lower Omo which will transform the landscape and undermine the subsistence economies of the local agropastoral population. The Gibe III hydroelectric dam, under construction in the middle Omo Basin and due to be completed in 2013/14, will reduce or eliminate the Omo flood, upon which thousands of people in the lower basin depend for flood-retreat cultivation.³⁸ But it will also greatly increase the downstream irrigation potential of the river. Already, thousands of hectares of tropical grassland in the lower basin have been leased to foreign and Ethiopian investors for the commercial production of such crops as palm oil, *Jatropha* (for biofuel feedstock) and sunflower seed. More recently still, a Canadian oil company, Africa Oil, announced that it will be undertaking a US\$6.5m programme of exploratory work in the “South Omo Block . . . just north of Lake Turkana”, and that it expects the majority of the costs involved to be incurred “in the first half of 2011”.³⁹

This is where the conservationist’s vision of the lower Omo as a wilderness area, in need of protection from the damaging impact of human activity, comes up against the state’s vision of it as a chaotic and unproductive wasteland. From the state’s point of view, commercial agriculture will make this wasteland productive, while providing revenue for the state’s coffers and employment for local people, who will thereby no longer have to wander from place to place, “hanging on to the tails of their cattle”. From the conservationists’ point of view, commercial plantations and their associated infrastructure will reduce the efficiency of the national parks as

protectors of bio-diversity (if they do not eat into the parks themselves) by reducing the extent of the surrounding “buffer zones”. As Homewood, amongst others, points out, the “species richness” of a protected area is directly related, not to the size of the protected area itself, but to the size of the “wider rangeland ecosystem with conservation-compatible local land uses like herding and farming” through which animals are free to move.⁴⁰ This conflict of interest will undoubtedly produce cracks in the formerly harmonious relationship between conservation and the state in the lower Omo. But it might also encourage the welcome development of a new alliance, in defence of the lower Omo ecosystem, between conservationists and those for whom the lower Omo is neither wilderness nor wasteland, but home.

Being at home

The two ways of perceiving the lower Omo which I have described so far are “irreducibly visual”⁴¹ – they represent different ways of “seeing” the world. In this they correspond perfectly to the concept of landscape, or “land appropriated by the disengaged look”,⁴² which emerged in sixteenth-century northern Italy with the use of linear perspective to create “realistic” landscape paintings.⁴³ This in turn was made possible by a new “politics of vision which . . . allowed land to be looked at as a commodity, disengaged from hereditary patterns of tenure”.⁴⁴ This pictorial way of representing the world implies a viewer who is positioned outside the frame, as observer rather than inhabitant. It objectifies what is viewed, whether the land or those who inhabit it, and agency is left firmly (if potentially) in the hands of the viewer. This, of course, is a way of looking which is presupposed by the ideals and objectives of fortress conservation, no less than by those of an expanding state or empire. It is a way of looking at the world that marginalizes locals, even to the extent of making them invisible. At this point, we need to look more closely at the distinction between landscape and environment and at the tension in landscape studies between observation and engagement or, less elegantly, “inhabitation”.

Simon Schama’s observation, with which I began this article, that landscape is a product of our “shaping perception”, might lead us to equate what he calls “raw matter” with environment, or nature – with what is presumed to be “there”, in advance of, and apart from, human activity, whether cognitive or not. On this basis, and using an analogy drawn from film theory, one might equate environment with the “pro-filmic reality” (what was there before the camera started rolling) and landscape with “footage” (what the camera actually “saw”). But while this analogy fits the concept of landscape as “a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings”,⁴⁵ it runs into serious difficulty when one considers that the environment is always the environment *of* a particular organism. As Tim Ingold points out, following James Gibson’s⁴⁶ ecological approach to visual perception, the organism does not simply “fit in” to a given environment, but *makes* it “by ascribing functions to the objects it encounters and thereby integrating them into a coherent system of its own . . . Take away the organism and the environment in this sense disappears with it.”⁴⁷ Hence Ingold’s definition of environment as “the world constituted” – or perhaps we might say “customized” – “in *relation* to the organism”.⁴⁸

While local people in the lower Omo have a rich and detailed knowledge of their environment, this knowledge relates almost entirely to the uses they make of it for daily living. The lower Omo is for them the very opposite of “land appropriated by

the disengaged look". It is a *lived* environment of everyday life, customized in relation to their own culturally specific needs and interests. When they see a tree they are most likely to see it as good for making fire sticks or milk containers, axe handles or duelling poles, or as a good shade tree, or a rapid encroacher on grazing land. They are too close to their physical surroundings, too "implicated" in them and have too much practical knowledge of them, to see them in formal rather than functional terms. Should we then conclude that the concept of landscape is not applicable to the way people in the lower Omo perceive their surroundings? The answer must be yes, if we take landscape to mean an "irreducibly visual" way of representing the world. As Thomas has again put it, there is "a tension between the distanced visual landscapes theorized in Western systems of knowledge and the landscapes we experience in everyday life, and which we experience in many ways other than visually".⁴⁹

It was with such a "distanced visual landscape" in mind that Raymond Williams famously wrote, "A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation."⁵⁰ This suggests another parallel between conservationism and nationalism, namely the paradoxical relationship they both have with the objects of their concern. For nationalists, the paradox is that you can only make a political cause out of your own customs and cultural values if you have gained enough distance from them to fit them into a largely fictional narrative, describing the unity and historical continuity of the nation. Ernest Gellner, when noting the important role often played by émigré intellectuals in nationalist movements, writes: "Genuine peasants or tribesmen, however proficient at folk-dancing, do not generally make good nationalists."⁵¹ For conservationists, or at least for those who believe that "real" nature is wild nature, the paradox is that nature can only be fully known and appreciated by those who do not engage with it in their daily lives – people who must take their children to "petting farms" to "meet the animals". Or as Cronon puts it, "The dream of an unworked natural landscape is ... the fantasy of people ... for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field."⁵²

The tension between observation and engagement has been a dominant theme in landscape studies in recent years. Thomas argues that traditional "landscape archeology", with its emphasis on expert observation by a distanced observer, is likely to miss any sense of "a continuous flow of human conduct".⁵³ He recommends instead an attempt to describe "the way people *are* on earth", which is summed up in Heidegger's term "dwelling".

Dwelling involves a lack of distance between people and things, a lack of casual curiosity, an engagement which is neither conceptualized nor articulated, and which arises through *using* the world rather than through scrutiny. Our immediate world is characterized by its inconspicuous familiarity – not by its to-be-looked-at-ness. So it is impossible to begin to look at traces of past human presence without seeing them from the first as bound up with human social action and subjectivity... Distanced, geometrical, "outsiders'" approaches to space can claim no priority over the social and the experiential, and the one perspective which they offer may be that of a dominant group.⁵⁴

Thomas is attempting here to convince his archaeological colleagues that "there are other ways of looking at place, besides what we might call a 'landscape perspective'".⁵⁵ Landscape for him is a historically contingent way of looking at the world, derived from the realism of landscape art in the European Renaissance. It is

not, therefore, “a universal concept, employed in the same way by all people at all times, and thus cannot represent a definitive way of apprehending the world”.⁵⁶ He is proposing instead that archaeologists adopt a phenomenological approach to the study of place or, in other words, that they reject the notion that “the places where we live are purely external objects”.⁵⁷

Ingold also adopts a “dwelling perspective”, derived from Heidegger, but he sees this as providing us with an alternative definition of landscape rather than an alternative approach to the study of place. Dwelling, he writes, refers to “the whole manner in which one lives one’s life on earth”.⁵⁸ Landscape then becomes “the familiar domain of our dwelling”⁵⁹ or “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein” and “inhabit its places”.⁶⁰ Rather than a re-definition of landscape, he sees this as reverting to an earlier meaning which preceded its use to describe a particular genre of art. Thus, in medieval Norse, *landskap* meant “an area of land bound into the customary usages of an agrarian community whose members would meet to resolve their affairs at the same place of assembly”.⁶¹ A similar phenomenological account of landscape is offered by Christopher Tilley. He describes landscape as “lived in . . . mediated, worked on and altered, replete with cultural meaning and symbolism”⁶² and defines it as “a setting in which locales occur and in dialectical relation to which meanings are created, reproduced and transformed”.⁶³

Not surprisingly, these phenomenological definitions of landscape make it difficult to tell the difference between landscape and place, if the latter is understood as “meaningful location”.⁶⁴ The definitions of landscape quoted above from Ingold and Tilley suggest that the essential characteristic of landscape, from a phenomenological perspective, is that it is made meaningful by and to “those who dwell therein”. Thus, the two terms are frequently used as though they were interchangeable. Ingold describes landscape as a collection of inhabited places, Tilley as a “setting in which locales occur” and which is “replete with cultural meaning”.⁶⁵ Bender tells us that recent phenomenological approaches to landscape focus on a “being-in-the-world attachment to place and landscape” and goes on to refer to “People’s sense of place and landscape”.⁶⁶ And Humphrey uses landscape “to refer to the meanings imputed by local people to their cultural and physical surroundings”.⁶⁷

If there is a problem with this it is not so much that it makes landscape and place difficult to tell apart as that it leaves us with two diametrically opposed meanings for the word “landscape” – one derived from the universal human condition of “dwelling” and one from the “disengaged look” of the sixteenth-century European landscape artist. Just about all these meanings have in common is the “de-naturalizing” attitude which is common to virtually all types of contemporary theory.⁶⁸ Students of landscape, however, seem not to be disconcerted by this. On the contrary, they see the ambiguity of the term, its ability to unite contradictory meanings, as a large part of its strength. Thus Daniels, in a much quoted phrase, warns against attempting to define the term at all, and thereby “to resolve its contradictions; rather, we should abide in its duplicity”.⁶⁹

The “duplicity of landscape” however does not seem to me to provide a way of bringing together, into a single descriptive and interpretive framework, the three ways of imagining the lower Omo which I have outlined in this paper. For this I believe we need to turn to the concept of place, and to the social activity of locality production. Place is a universal aspect of the human condition which is experienced at all spatial levels, from the most domestic to the global. The process of locality production, furthermore, involves the exercise of power in relation to other,

competing locality producing efforts. Although Ingold and Tilley make much use of the concepts of place and locale in arguing for their “dwelling” approach to landscape, they do not emphasize that “dwelling” involves the exercise of power in relation to other dwellers, or would-be dwellers, competing to establish “locales” in the same or nearby “settings”. Dwelling, just as locality production, always involves winners and losers, colonizers and resisters. This is recognized by Thomas, who writes:

we cannot assume that past landscapes were inhabited by integrated and smoothly-running social systems. More likely we should imagine struggles played out across the tiniest aspects of day-to-day existence. We need to recover the “spaces of resistance”, not just the dominated landscape.⁷⁰

In the next, concluding, section I try to show how the three ways of imagining the lower Omo I have outlined correspond to three competing locality producing projects, carried on at three different spatial levels, of which they are the legitimizing ideologies.

Producing locality

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has pointed out that, once we start asking about the activities that create a sense of place or, as he prefers, locality, in a particular social setting, we realize that most of the everyday, as well as the formal, activities anthropologists write about in their ethnographies comes into this category.⁷¹ They include everything from the building of houses and settlements and the dividing up of fields and cultivation sites to rituals of age and peace-making and the way the environment is spoken about and classified. Another important point made by Appadurai is that the “locality producing” or place making activities of one group are not carried on in isolation from those of other groups. Locality production involves a kind of power struggle, in which different groups compete to create localities which other groups then have to recognize and take account of in their own locality producing efforts. These efforts are ongoing – they represent a constant effort to keep at bay “an endemic sense of anxiety and instability in social life”.⁷² But although ongoing, most locality production can be traced to an initial “moment of colonization”.

The production of a neighborhood is inherently colonizing, in the sense that it involves the assertion of socially . . . organized power over places and settings that are viewed as potentially chaotic or rebellious The production of a neighbourhood is inherently an exercise of power over some sort of hostile or recalcitrant environment, which may take the form of another neighbourhood.⁷³

The colonizing character of locality production in the Lower Omo is attested by oral traditions which tell how the ancestors of certain key clans or territorial sections incorporated other groups and individuals whom they “found” or “caught” when they arrived in their present territory. Mursi oral tradition, for example, describes a “moment of colonization” when members of certain Mursi clans arrived at the Omo for the first time, coming from the west, probably in the early nineteenth century. Here is a shortened version of the standard account of this event.

When the people were still living west of the Omo, two bulls started going off on their own to drink. In the evening the people would say “Where did those two bulls go today?” One morning, some men decided to follow the bulls. They watched them very carefully and when they went off on their own, they followed them. The bulls went all the way to the Omo. There were people on the other bank who said to the Mursi “Those are our animals – they come here to drink every day”. “Nonsense” replied the Mursi, “they are our animals. They led us here and we have found you.” “No” said the people on the other bank “they are our animals. Can’t you see the sorghum here? This is our land. You haven’t found us: we have found you.”

When the men who had followed the bulls got home, a meeting was held and they told everyone what they had seen. “It was a wonderful place” they said, “with lots of sorghum growing along the banks of a huge river. We should move there”. So they decided to migrate to the Omo. When they arrived at the Omo, they crossed over to the east bank where they found the Berneshe and Bongo people.

The clans who followed the bulls to the Omo⁷⁴ were making a claim to the land and giving the people who lived on it an ultimatum either to leave, or become Mursi. It was an act of political incorporation and colonization. The response, “No: we found you”, was an act of resistance, by which the locals invited the incomers to become part of their political community, and thereby give up their Mursi identity. Clearly, this particular power struggle was decided in favour of the Mursi. In Appadurai’s terminology, this was a “moment of colonization”, in which the Mursi started to create new neighbourhoods for themselves, east of the Omo, and thereby to create a new context for the locality producing efforts of other neighbourhoods. Some of those they “found” moved away, while others, named in the above account as Berneshe and Bongo, stayed to become constituent, if more or less subordinate, parts of the emerging Mursi polity. From this moment forward, their history became the history of the Mursi.

The most powerful place-making force the Mursi and their neighbours have encountered over the past 50 years has come not from the known world of the lower Omo but from the relatively unknown world of the Ethiopian state. The place-making project of the state aims to create a homogeneous national space, in which places exist to produce and reproduce “compliant national citizens”.⁷⁵ For this task, the state needs neighbourhoods, but neighbourhoods have their own place-making activities which, however weakened they may be by state encroachment, represent a continuing threat to the state-building project. The place-making activities of neighbourhoods aim to produce reliable and loyal “local subjects”, knowledgeable about the local environment and about community history and values. This tension between two different place-making projects is one reason why state-building can never be an entirely one-way, state-centric process – even in Ethiopia, where state-building has been seen by most historians as a relentless process of expansion by the Abyssinian “centre” into its highland and lowland “periphery”. Rather, it must be seen as a kind of negotiation, however one-sided, which has a lasting impact on both sides.⁷⁶

If states need neighbourhoods to achieve their objectives, conservationists, as we have seen, need states. But whereas, until quite recently, the design and implementation of conservation policy, including the management of protected areas, was largely the responsibility of states, this is one of many areas in which globalization has sapped the power and autonomy of the modern state. Increasingly, “transnational networks of donors, NGOs and private companies have begun to get engaged in managing protected areas, defining national conservation policies and establishing

and maintaining private parks”.⁷⁷ Like all such global actors and interest groups, international conservation organizations still need states to achieve their objectives, just as states need neighbourhoods to achieve theirs. But like multinational corporations, these organizations enjoy a large area of freedom from state control and regulation which makes them more or less unaccountable to the governments through which they work and to the people who live in their areas of operation. This applies especially in developing states,⁷⁸ a good example being the brief involvement of African Parks Foundation in the Omo National Park.

According to its website, African Parks Network (as it is now known) prides itself on “combining world class conservation practice with business expertise”. It describes its “business model” as a “portfolio of parks spread across the continent” with each national “project” acting as “an independent business entity responsible for its own budgeting and decision making”.⁷⁹ Its ethos and legal structure, therefore, is very much that of a multinational corporation. Furthermore, the “public–private partnership” agreement it signed with the Ethiopian government in 2005 seemed designed to make the Omo National Park into a “privately secured enclave”,⁸⁰ like those set up by transnational mining and energy companies in Africa.⁸¹ This arrangement amounted to “privatised sovereignty”, since it gave “the company” (as it is described in the agreement) such a free hand, especially over law enforcement, that the park became a virtual state within a state.⁸²

In his letter to the Ethiopian Government announcing APF’s decision to withdraw from the Omo (6 December 2006), the Chief Executive Officer, Peter Fearnhead, mentioned not only the complexity of dealing with community relations and the “unjustified” criticisms it was receiving from human rights organizations, but also the unsustainable financial costs it was incurring. “We have already invested in excess of \$2.5m with almost no external contributions to core operating expenses” he wrote. “To continue is simply a waste of scarce resources.” The decision was based, therefore, on an assessment of how the financial and reputational costs of APF’s continued management of the Omo park would affect its international business “portfolio”, which included five other parks, in three other African countries. The Board was acting in the interests neither of its host government nor of the people living in and around the park but, perfectly reasonably, in its own interests as a global business organization. International conservation, it seems, is now part of a locality producing project in some ways more powerful than that of the state itself. Along with multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations, electronic communication networks and transnational communities created by international migration, it has become part of the global production of locality.

Acknowledgements

This article is one of the outcomes of research project A/H E510590/1, “Landscape, People and Parks”, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom, under its “Landscape and Environment” programme. I am grateful to my colleagues in the project, David Anderson, Marco Bassi, and Graciela Gil-Romera for many helpful ideas and discussions; to Stephen Daniels, Director of the Landscape and Environment Programme, for helping me to understand better the intellectual history of landscape studies; to Chris Hillman, Ludwig Siege and Lakew Berhanu for sharing their knowledge and experience of conservation policy and practice in Ethiopia; to Will Hurd, and Shauna Latosky for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper; to Tim Ingold for his penetrating comments and constructive advice on my use of the term “landscape”; and to my wife, Patricia Turton, for

her careful reading and vigilant editing of various versions of the manuscript. I am, of course, responsible for any errors, omissions and misunderstandings that remain.

Notes

1. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 10–12.
2. Robbins, *Political Ecology*, 5.
3. Adams and Hutton, “People, Parks and Poverty.”
4. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, ch. 9.
5. Cresswell, *Place*, 7.
6. Hoben, “Paradigms and Politics.”
7. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 254ff., 301; Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness.”
8. Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”, 79.
9. Brown, “Ethiopia’s Wildlife Conservation Programme,” 334, emphasis added.
10. *Ibid.*, 334.
11. Stephenson and Mizuno, *Recommendations*, 1–2.
12. Bolton, *Ethiopian Wildlands*, 138–9.
13. Stephenson and Mizuno, *Recommendations*, 41.
14. Neumann, “The Post-War Conservation Boom.”
15. Agriconsulting, *Feasibility Study*, 60.
16. Turton, “The Mursi and the Elephant Question”; MGM Environmental Solutions Ltd, *National Park Rehabilitation in Southern Ethiopia*.
17. Now based in South Africa and known as African Parks Network. See its website at: <http://www.african-parks.org/> (accessed July 12, 2010).
18. Adams and Hulme, “Conservation and Community,” 14.
19. Barrow and Murphree, “Community Conservation,” 31.
20. The statement announcing its intention to terminate its agreement with the government can be found at: <http://www.mursi.org/news-items/african-parks-to-give-up-its--management-of-the-omo-national-park> (accessed March 13, 2010).
21. Adams and Hulme, “Conservation and Community,” 9.
22. Hoben, “Paradigms and Politics,” 1009.
23. Blower, *In Ethiopia*.
24. Hillman, *Compendium*.
25. Baumann, *Europe of Strangers*, 4.
26. Brockington, “Environmentalism in Tanzania”; Neumann, “The Post-War Conservation Boom”; Peluso, “Coercing Conservation.”
27. Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*, 15.
28. Almagor, “Institutionalizing a Fringe Periphery.”
29. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.
30. Turton, “Looking for a Cool Place,” 28.
31. Smith, *Ethnic Origins*, 28.
32. Ingold, *Lines*, 77.
33. Turton, “The Politician, the Priest and the Anthropologist,” 15.
34. Robbins, *Political Ecology*, 152.
35. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
36. Peluso, “Coercing Conservation.”
37. Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Pastoral Development Policy*, 5.
38. Kloos et al., “Problems for Pastoralists in the Lowlands.”
39. “Africa Oil Signs Agreement to Acquire South Omo Block in Ethiopia,” *MarketWire* June 17, 2010, <http://www.ethiomeia.com/absolute/3382.html> (accessed July 9, 2010).
40. Homewood, “Policy, Environment and Development,” 129.
41. Daniels, “The Duplicity of Landscape,” 212.
42. Thomas, “The Politics of Vision,” 22.
43. Cosgrove, *Social Formation*.
44. Thomas, “The Politics of Vision”, 22.
45. Daniels and Cosgrove, “Introduction,” 1.
46. Gibson, *Visual Perception*.
47. Ingold, “Culture and Perception,” 42.
48. *Ibid.*, 44, emphasis in the original.

49. Thomas, "Archaeology, Landscape and Dwelling," 302.
50. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 120.
51. Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 162.
52. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness", 80–1.
53. Thomas, "The Politics of Vision," 26.
54. *Ibid.* 28–9.
55. *Ibid.* 27.
56. *Ibid.*, 20.
57. *Ibid.*, 27.
58. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 185.
59. Ingold, "The Temporality of Landscape," 154.
60. *Ibid.*, 156.
61. Personal communication, 2009.
62. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, 26.
63. *Ibid.*, 25.
64. Cresswell, *Place*, 7.
65. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, 26.
66. Bender, "Introduction," 5–6.
67. Humphrey, "Contested Landscapes," 55.
68. Easthope, *Contemporary Film Theory*, 1.
69. Daniels, "The Duplicity of Landscape," 218.
70. Thomas, "The Politics of Vision," 29.
71. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 179–80.
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.* 183–4.
74. The story of people being led to their present territory by their cattle is a recurrent theme in the mythico-histories of the peoples of the lower Omo, as it is amongst other East African pastoralists. See, for example, accounts of how the Turkana split from the Jie in Gulliver, "Karamajong Cluster", Lamphear, "People of the Grey Bull" and Mirzeler, "Oral Tradition of Origin."
75. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 190.
76. Boone, *Political Topographies*, ch. 2; Donham "Old Abyssinia."
77. Brockington, Duffy and Igoe, *Nature Unbound*, 164–5.
78. Dine, *International Trade and Human Rights*, 48–9.
79. The quotations are from the website of African Parks Network at <http://www.african-parks.org/> and http://www.african-parks.org/apffoundation/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=72 (accessed July 12, 2010).
80. Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 35.
81. It is worth noting that the Chairman and main funder of APF during its early years, and while it was setting up its operations in Ethiopia, was the late Paul van Vlissingen, a retired Dutch businessman who's extensive business interests had included Calor Gas and who therefore had considerable experience negotiating oil and gas exploration contracts with foreign governments.
82. The agreement can be seen at <http://www.mursi.org/pdf/apf-omo-agreement.pdf> (accessed July 12, 2010).

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