



Celebrity and the environment: fame, wealth and power in conservation

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BOOK REVIEW

Celebrity and the environment: fame, wealth and power in conservation, by D. Brockington, London, Zed Books, 2009, 193 pp., (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-84277-974-3

Celebrity and the Environment is among the first major works that give a critical analysis of political ecology of the celebrity industry. Drawing on a thorough media research and extensive readings, the book takes a critical stance on the role of fame industry in shaping global environmental politics. The main issue of this book is not only the identification of how fame, wealth and power works to influence environmental movement but also what celebrity conservationism might signify. On this, Brockington argues that celebrity is an art, and the rules for its production can be taught. Meanwhile, biological nature that celebrity seeks to conserve is a social construct. Humans are central to both nature construction and they are also part of it, a point reinforced through the exclusion of humans from nature by other humans in the process of producing images of nature congenial to human consumption. The book therefore answers important questions of how and why celebrity is brought into conservation to pursue certain agendas. These questions are pertinent because conservation agendas are not given but are instead created by people on behalf of nature. So, in whose image and interest are conservation agendas pursued? Who wins, who loses from celebrity's support for conservation causes? In answering these questions, the book provides counter-narratives to common explanations of environmental causes such as the noble goal of saving the planet from global warming and loss of biodiversity. In this way, Brockington aligns his work with critical scholarship that seeks to provide nuanced perspectives on the relationship between nature and society under capitalism.

Fame is an industry which produces fabricated images of nature. The book critically analyses the role of images, symbols and icons in capitalism, and analyses how they obscure social realities. That is, celebrities are icons used to represent a certain simplified version of the world. They govern what we know about the world and how we should know it. Their works in the production of images of nature, landscape and wildlife are used to sell cars, beauty products or alcohol because they signify beauty, rarity, speed, pristiness, etc. The sign value of the image and the ideas that they signify can be attached to other commodities and help to sell them. Importantly, symbols and signs that proliferate in celebrity conservation gloss over complex social landscapes that surround conservation. They help manufacture notions of wilderness that erases much of human histories. Without these histories, Brockington argues, facts about conservation and wilderness are and will continue to be distorted by celebrity conservation. He is concerned that the celebrity industry has created, and will continue to create, a generation of conservationists prone to the media, i.e. those who do not reason beyond the media and who are guided by the Western notion of nature that ignores the relationship between people and nature.

A clear message from Brockington's work is that celebrities constitute an industrial product because their fame is an attribute required by a broader capitalist system. This calls for the need to understand the businesses that produce celebrities. These are people and personalities produced by the media for economic and political ends, which raises

other important questions of whose worldview of conservation celebs promote and at what cost (to both their networks, the environment and the societies of which they are part). These are indeed critical questions if we are to understand and explain celebrity as part of a broad process of global environmental movement attached to capitalism. It is also important to understand celebrities as part of networks. The power of celebrity in conservation can only be properly understood through the analysis of the networks of which celebrities are part. There are four elements of these networks; Conservation NGOs, Foundations, Companies and wealthy individuals. The interaction of these with celebrity has created space and opportunities for the mushrooming of celebrities, NGOs and Foundations over time. These networks have implications for the democratic character of the environmental movement. That is, a few wealthy organisations and individuals have a disproportionate influence over conservation affairs. Hence, celebrity conservation compounds the problem of elitism in conservation in that celebs are part of the global elites who are chosen undemocratically to speak for us on matters of environment. This gives the illusion of representativeness even when they lack integrity.

Reading this book forced me to reflect on a meeting with some college students in Massachusetts's Five College African Scholars Program in 2004 where third year students in Anthropology were reading a book on *Imposing Wilderness* by Roderick Neumann (1998). Even though the focus of the discussion was on the problematic relationship between conservation and livelihoods in Africa, some of the students maintained their preconceived notion of Africa as a wilderness. Brockington's book has made me understand student questions better after nearly a decade. The book would make any reader reflect on daily encounters with media coverage on celebrity works in conservation. Brockington has convincingly argued that environmentalism has become a convenient venture where both individuals and organisations have converged in search of publicity, financial growth and the power that comes with them. He is to be commended for his analytical stance on the relationship between celebrity and conservation which takes the reader by surprise through familiar things, yet rarely analysed through the lens and depth that the book has done. *Celebrity and the Environment* is not a general study of celebrities and their works in environmental conservation, but a study of a specific aspect of it: where that is taking conservation. The book challenges the populist movement that conservation has become. It does call for engagement between its supporters and critics to better understand the distortions of representation with which the populist movement is filled. Clearly, the author runs the risk of remaining *un-celebrity* since fame is not won by promoting the other side of conservation, which is exclusion. If long lists of celebrities and charismatic conservationists attached to the chapters can be excused for the personal reminiscences of speaking for the '(un)celebrated', this book is a valuable addition to the growing literature on conservation and corporate interests.

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