

Why conservation success stories in Tanzania need a closer look

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By several accounts, 2018 has been a [great year](#) for community-based conservation in Tanzania.



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Research papers and reports by conservation scientists and non-governmental organisations suggest that community-based interventions are [popular](#), eagerly [adopted](#) and have [positive ecological impacts](#).

[But our research](#) suggests that a closer look is needed.

Contrary to narratives of conservation success, we [illustrate](#) that, by and large, community-based conservation in Tanzania has spread through top-down, donor-financed implementation.

What's more, we [also question](#) narratives of ecological success. These narratives are based on simplistic ecological concepts which misrepresent socio-ecological complexities on the ground.

We urge researchers, non-governmental organisations, funders, and the media to consider more carefully how their work affects rural communities. Inaccurate narratives can cause harm, conflict and resistance. Ultimately, they can even [undermine](#) long-term conservation objectives.

The narrative vs the reality

[Research](#) shows that many conservation initiatives in Tanzania are not eagerly adopted. In fact, some have been [imposed](#) despite [resistance](#) by local communities. Many residents [fear](#) becoming economically dispossessed, losing their land, or both.

Tanzania's flagship Wildlife Management Area, Burunge, is a case in point. It shows that simple narratives of success quickly fall apart under critical scrutiny.

Burunge is a community-based conservation project established in the 2000s in 10 villages. In financial terms, Burunge may be called a "success". It generates several hundred thousand US dollars in revenue per year from tourism. But, with a population of more than 30,000, Burunge's per capita income is [negligible](#).

More importantly, residents are expected to pay a high price in return for tourism revenues. As one of us has [documented](#), the Wildlife Management Area is characterised by deeply divisive politics of coercive land appropriation for tourism. Residents and their livestock are kept out of dry season grazing areas so that wealthy tourists can enjoy luxury wilderness experiences.

Nonetheless, there are reports that Burunge is a successfully implemented and [locally run](#) initiative. But these reports don't take into account that residents have been [protesting](#) against their exclusion from key livestock grazing areas since it was established. Stories of success disregard this reality of [green grabbing](#).

Conservation biologists also make scientifically questionable claims about the alleged [ecological success](#) of conservation interventions. Such claims are based on the assumption that a reduced livestock density and an increasing wildlife density constitute a better ecological state of the environment.

We [take issue](#) with this simple concept being applied to an ecologically dynamic, semi-arid environment of Northern Tanzania. The ecological conditions in the area are far more [complex](#) than simple changes in livestock and wildlife densities.

Such studies do not evaluate the ecological impact of conservation. They simply report if conservation rules have been successfully enforced. Failing to distinguish between *conservation* and *ecology*, such studies simply conflate the two.

However, conservation objectives are not necessarily the same as ecologically sound objectives.

The politics and ethics of selling success

But why are stories of success so widespread in conservation despite little evidence to support them?

One reason is that individuals and organisations [have](#) a stake in marketing success stories. [Selling success](#) is an important [commodity](#) in conservation.

To us, it's ethically problematic to suggest that Tanzania's community-based conservation is on a path of success. This narrative obscures the politics of [coercive conservation](#) in the country.

We care about people and the environment, and we would like to see humans and animals (domestic and wild) thrive. Yet as scientists, we also have a responsibility to avoid contributing further to the [marginalisation and dispossession](#) of the most vulnerable people in the places we study and care about.

The rocky road towards a sustainable vision of human-animal interactions cannot be separated from broader [political and](#)

[economic processes](#) in Tanzania. Scientists, conservation and development practitioners, cannot remove themselves from this reality.

By defining what success – and by extension failure – looks like in coercive conservation, we help create a particular reality. In this reality, the weakest members of society are blamed when interventions, whose terms are dictated by others, fail.

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