Beemen, van, O. (2024) *Ondernemers in het wild. Het ontluisterende verhaal van een club witte weldoeners in Afrika*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, ISBN 978 90 446 4488 3, € 22,50 (paperback)

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Investigative journalism and organizational ethnography differ in degree and not in kind

Investigative journalism and organisational ethnography differ in degree and not in kind. Where the two generally overlap, but may differ in degree, is that both are based on extensive empirical fieldwork, rely mainly on qualitative data, and produce mostly monographs. However, they can often be distinguished from each other in their use of sources and interpretive framework. Olivier van Beemen's new book on 'African Parks'[1] and nature conservation in Africa is a work of investigative journalism, while I consider myself an organisational ethnographer on the topic of nature conservation in southern Africa (my PhD was on private wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe and ever since I have been involved in researching nature conservation in southern Africa). So Van Beemen and I are very much interested in the same topic and field, but approach it rather differently from our respective fields of investigative journalism and organizational ethnography. This review is an ethnographer's take on the work of an investigative journalist, with all the biases that this may bring. But maybe this 'ethnographer's take' could also reveal something that can be taken to heart by investigative journalists in terms of substantiating their claims, method(ologie)s and interpretive framework(s) more explicitly, by referencing relevant research and sources that are readily available. Especially if the research and the writing of the book takes years, in van Beemen's case 'ruim drie jaar' (more than three years)[2], this must be possible.

Van Beemen's book got a lot of attention in the Dutch press[3] and for good reasons, as his latest book, *Ondernemers in het wild. Het ontluisterende verhaal van een club witte weldoeners in Afrika*, reveals serious human right violations in the operations of African Parks towards poachers and local communities across the African continent. To me, the independence of a journalist and more broadly 'the press', when writing about what they find during their investigations, is a *sine qua non* for our democracy and our freedom. The way any organisation responds to this basic right of a journalist, in my opinion, says as much about the organisation as it does about what the journalist has written about them. In this review I do not want to repeat what has already been written about the book in newspapers, rather I want to highlight three, rather basic and commonsensical issues, that an organisational ethnographic researcher might want to say about this investigation. These circle around 1) the use of academic sources, and in its wake a historical and current contextualisation of nature conservation in Africa; 2) methodological reflections on the positionality of the researcher and on the research process; 3) Recent academic developments in thinking about animal-human distinctions. Let me explain these three issues in a little more detail.

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[1] 'African Parks is a non-profit conservation organisation that takes on the complete responsibility for the rehabilitation and long-term management of national parks in partnership with governments and local communities' (https://www.africanparks.org/about-us/our-story, accessed 10 May 2024).

[2] From the back cover.

[3] Bruyne, de, M. (1 May 2024) Natuurwachten worden ook folteraar, of grensbewaker, *NRC*; Huët, van, B. (2 May 2024) Natuurbeschermer zet zich neer als reddende engel, maar uit onderzoek 'blijkt een andere werkelijkheid', *AD*; Huët, van, B. (2 May 2023) Is African Parks nieuw kolonialisme?, *AD*; Huët, van, B. (3 May 2024) Natuurbeschermer kent duistere kant, *Het Parool*; in *De Groene Amsterdammer* (18 April 2024) Van Beemen himself wrote an article based on the book, *Hè, zij waren toch de good guys?* Zwam, van, E. (9 May 2024) Olifanten, leeuwen, neushoorns én martelpraktijken in African Parks, *Trouw*.

Academic sources and contextualisation

Nature conservation has a long and turbulent history in Africa, and over the years many academic researchers have researched and written about this topic from all kinds of angles and perspectives. Although Van Beemen does include a few references, apparently his three years of research did not include reading a fair selection of the available academic work on nature conservation in Africa. For example, a major work providing a rather balanced overview of the history of nature conservation in Africa is *Against extinction. The story of conservation*, by William Adams (2004)[4] or, by the same author, his four-volume set on conservation (2008)[5]. There is also the topic of 'community conservation', that Van Beemen considers to be of primary importance throughout the book. Of the various community conservation initiatives developed over the years in, especially, southern Africa, not one is mentioned or referenced by Van Beemen. Nothing on Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE (Co mmunity Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) or Zambia's ADMADE (Administrative Management Design for Game Management), or Namibia's IRDNC (Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation). Nothing in general on the acronym 'CBNRM', Co mmunity Based Natural Resource Management. There is a host of readily available academic literature on all these topics that could have enriched Van Beemen's investigations. It would certainly have informed a broader and more detailed historical contextualisation of conservation in Africa, including the colonial hunting aspect (the latter again a topic on which there is an extensive body of academic literature[6]). The historical contextualisation could also have led to more detailed descriptions of the current situation in various African countries, including South Africa, where African Parks started out. The onslaught of Zuma's presidency on South Africa's economy, on its international reputation and on the general disillusionment of South African people, has done no good to nature conservation either (nor the recent elections in South Africa in which Zuma again played a major role). Poaching is thriving, as is the lion bone trade, while budgets for national parks and other game reserves are decreasing, the tax base is shrinking even further, and corruption has by now permeated every level of society and activity in South Africa. This contextualisation is important to draw any conclusions about what can be expected from South Africa in the (near) future with regard to nature conservation and law enforcement. It could also inform the expectations we can have of any organisation working in that environment. Not in terms of providing excuses for continuing human rights violations, but in terms of its day-to-day operations. This also holds true for Zimbabwe. Mugabe was an extremely violent dictator until the very end of his life, and has been succeeded by Mnangagwa, another violent dictator. In this context and because of it, conservation, and certainly community conservation, is suffering, together with the rest of the people of Zimbabwe. Contextualising one's investigations in more detail in this way will enrich the data collection and its analysis.

Methodological reflexivity

Investigative journalists and organisational ethnographers are their own research tool. They both venture out into the field and gather and construct the dataset. Their personal brains are the labs in which the data are treated and analysed. In organisational ethnography, this realisation has led to a broad consensus on the necessity to be incredibly reflexive about yourself and the research process:

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[4] Adams, W.A. (2004) *Against extinction. The story of conservation*, London: Earthscan.

[5] Adams, W.A. (ed.) (2008) *Conservation*, four volumes, London: Earthscan.

[6] See for instance MacKenzie, J.M. (1997) *The empire of nature: Hunting, conservation, and British imperialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Beinart, W. and Hughes, L. (eds) (2007) *Environment and empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Why do I get access to an organisation, … or not? Who wants to talk to me, in what ways and about what? How does my self-identity influence my research approach? What does my affiliation, gender, age, skin colour, sexual orientation, religion, clothing, life style, ableism, class, and what not, do to my research? How does it influence the ways I am received, who relates to me, how people treat me, the kind of data I am able to gather, my initiatives that fail, or the ways I think about this topic and the fieldwork? All these reflexive questions are not meant to develop into a narcissist in the process of self-reflexivity, nor to become a relativist about the trustworthiness of empirical data, but to position yourself *vis-à-vis* your topic and field. This is often a revealing and humbling process, which is not meant to depreciate your own efforts, but to show the complexities and layers of social interactions and relations in the field and during fieldwork. Again, in the literature there are many good examples to be found.[7] Let me also give one recent example of a useful academic source which I think will be helpful to interpret van Beemen's tense relations with African Parks that he so vividly recounts throughout his book. Michel Anteby[8] describes fieldworkers, like Van Beemen and myself, as 'interlopers', an interloper being 'someone who becomes involved in an activity or a social group without being asked or wanted, or who enters a place without being allowed'.[9] In six chapters Anteby describes six possible ways in which interlopers in the field are resisted by organisations: 'obstructing access', 'hiding from view', 'shelving', 'silencing', 'forgetting', and 'denying'. Every strategy is discussed in a separate chapter in the book. Without detailing them here, I advise Van Beemen to read this fascinating book, as I noticed all six forms happening to Van Beemen in his relations with African Parks. As an investigative journalist, he seems to exclusively blame African Parks for this. Anteby on the other hand, suggests that a reflection and analysis of the various forms of resistance by an organisation is a rich source of data and that '(t)he rare researchers who do reflexively analyse such resistance along the way *or retrospectively* see immense benefits in the exercise' (Anteby 2024: 14, emphasis added). He therefore recommends 'all fieldworkers, in academia *and beyond*, to take his book along 'as a travel companion' (ibid.: 13, emphasis added). I have taken Anteby's advice, as resistance by organisations has been my constant companion during my fieldwork endeavours in nature conservation in southern Africa.

Animals and humans differ in degree and not in kind: Consequences for nature conservation

By now, there is overwhelming scientific evidence that animals and humans do not differ in kind, but in degree. The key concept in this realisation is that sentience, as a basis for consciousness, is part of evolutionary continuity and therefore as much present in animals as it is in humans. Two important declarations are testimony to these developments in science, the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness from 2012[10], chaired by the famous late scientist Stephen Hawking, and the recent New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness from 2024.[11] These declarations are building on and substantiated by a large body of academic texts and empirical evidence. If we let ourselves be critically convinced by this evidence for the moment, it has fundamental consequences for how we think about animal-human relations, certainly in our daily practices, like our food habits, but also with respect to nature conservation. If we go along with these new academic insights, human exceptionalism and exclusivity are no longer defensible. Animal sentience counts as much as human

[7] Just one example here, as to not overload this review with references: Alvesson, M. and Sköldberg, K. (2017, third edition) *Reflexive methodology. New vistas for qualitative research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
[8] Anteby, M. (2024) *The interloper. Lessons from resistance in the field*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
[9] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/interloper (accessed 8 May 2024).
[10] https://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf.
[11] https://sites.google.com/nyu.edu/nydeclaration/declaration.

sentience does. On the basis of this scientific evidence, nature conservation will have to turn into 'sentient conservation'.[12]

Van Beemen is rightfully critical about African Park's view on humanity, based on his fieldwork observations, interviews and meetings with real people, interacting face to face and building relations with them. While interacting with people in and around the conservation areas and on various levels in African Parks, he comes, amongst other things, across atrocious practices carried out by African Parks. Whereas Van Beemen also has a chapter devoted to animals, chapter 33, this is only based on an indirect relation with his respondents, via the figures presented by African Parks about 'their' animals, in their Annual Reports. In this context he does not speak of sentient fellow creatures, but about statistical aggregates and 'species' instead of individuals. Van Beemen is rightfully angry about the forced removals of people, but does not speak with similar moral consideration about the 'megaverhuizingen' ['megarelocations'](248) that African Parks has forced on elephants and rhino in the past, and is now planning for about 3000 white rhino they bought from 'rhino farmer' John Hume. In light of the latest scientific evidence, the translocation, culling, and hunting of animals, and even mass wildlife tourism, will need to be rethought, and will have to be included within our range of moral consideration. If we allow that to happen, we will become equally mad about what happens to people as we are about what happens to other sentient beings. I took up this challenge 15 years after I wrote my PhD Thesis on private wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe.[13] In retrospect, I would have done my fieldwork, my data gathering and my theoretical analysis in a completely different way. Taking shared sentience into the equation changes everything. An awareness of these advances in science could also have had a significant impact on how Van Beemen did his research, how he went about his fieldwork and his analysis. Now the animals were no more than a background to a human story. In academia, and elsewhere, women were once only considered background to men. That has been challenged by scientific evidence which has had a major impact on all aspects of society. The concept of shared sentience calls for a similar societal, intellectual and educational revision.

In conclusion

Van Beemen's book is worth reading for what it is, a report of an investigative journey into African Parks as an organisation and its operations in nature conservation areas in Africa. It is also worth reading for what it reveals about some of the atrocious practices of African Parks in the field. The book disappoints, however, when it comes to its lack of making use of readily available academic sources on the various issues that it raises. This absence of sources leads to poor historical and current contextualisations of the various places and countries on the African continent. It also allows Van Beemen to have an unsubstantiated belief in his own fieldwork and research methodologies, Last but not least, it reproduces stories of human exceptionalism in a time when anthropocentrism is not only seriously challenged by scientific evidence, but can actually no longer be defended under planetary circumstances.

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[12] Gewald, J.B., Spierenburg, M. and Wels, H. (eds) (2018) *Nature conservation in southern Africa: Morality and marginality: towards sentient conservation?*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.

[13] Wels, H. (2015) "Animals like us": Revisiting organizational ethnography and research, *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 4(3), 242-259.