



Editorial

Introduction. Nature 2.0: New media, online activism and the cyberpolitics of environmental conservation



1. Introduction

“ROT IN HELL” was only one of many violent threats written on Walter Palmer’s porch in July 2015, after he had hunted and killed Cecil, a local favourite and famous lion in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe. Palmer, a Minnesota-based dentist and avid trophy hunter, had become the target of multiple forms of vigilantism; he became the central focus of outrage in which nature lovers, celebrities and anti-hunting activists wanted justice for Cecil and punishment for Palmer’s actions. Most of the vigilantism was Internet based, but Palmer was also targeted at his home with painted messages on his property, many of which also imbued with online activism via hashtags such as #CatLivesMatter and #CecilTheLion. Online, a host of other actions ensued: a Facebook page entitled “Shame Lion Killer Dr. Walter Palmer and River Bluff Dental” was set up; Palmer’s Yelp page was inundated with numerous angry comments;¹ and a public online petition to demand justice for Cecil’s death, signed by 1.131.639 people and targeted at Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe,² further increased pressure on getting Palmer formally tried and jailed. Through all this online activism, a particular yet complex picture of African nature was also built up, one that combined a wild African nature that befitted the “true story of the lion king” with a fragile African nature, violated illegitimately by a brutal, foreign hunter.³

We highlight Cecil and Palmer’s story because it is a well-known recent case of ‘nature 2.0’; a concept coined to promote investigation into how new online media transform and influence (re)imaginings and understandings of (nonhuman and human) nature (Büscher, 2013, 2016). New media, which include ‘web 2.0’ applications and technologies, such as Wikipedia and YouTube, and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, allow people to create, rate and change online content and share these within cyberspace. Central therefore is how new media enable internet-users to ‘co-create’ the online activities, services, spaces and information they produce or consume, at least within the limits of possible action. New media therefore influence and change many dynamics and issues, including how humans view, (re)imagine

and understand (the rest of) nature. Clearly, then, the case of Cecil is only one way to highlight the importance and multi-dimensionality of nature 2.0, and in this *Geoforum* special issue we intend to further investigate and complicate this term and the environmental politics to which it can lead.

Most of the articles do this from the perspective of environmental conservation. With much global biodiversity, ecosystems and natural landscapes in persistent rapid decline, conservation actors, concerned individuals and organisations are rapidly deploying new media techniques and facilities, allowing those concerned about environmental degradation, global biodiversity and ecosystem decline to (seemingly) engage more directly with proximate and distant conservation activities and actors (Büscher and Igoe, 2013). Hence, the seven articles in the special issue critically interrogate how social media, web 2.0 applications and new forms of online activism change the politics and material/cultural forms and practices of global conservation and environmental management and how they affect people and nature in different spatial and temporal contexts. A special emphasis in all articles is on the connections between spaces of online conservation/environmental consumption and offline spaces of conservation/environmental production in different parts of the globe. We therefore believe that the articles individually and in combination have potentially major implications for political ecology, human geography and new media studies, and in this introduction we briefly aim to outline why.

The overarching questions that guide the special issue are: How can we conceptualize nature 2.0 as a *space* of enacting/practicing/experiencing global conservation and what new (or familiar) political ecologies and geographies follow from this? How are online nature 2.0 activist campaigns constructed, implemented and contested, and to what type of conservation discourses and politics do these lead? How do online and offline conservation spaces affect and influence each other, and how does that relate to global, national and local politics of conservation? And finally, how do we understand nature 2.0 in the context of rapid changes in the global political economy and how can the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, class and age – amongst others – inform that understanding?

These are broad questions that defy easy answers. Yet exploring them through the prism of nature 2.0 allows the articles in this special issue to highlight broader themes and insights into contemporary environmental politics. By outlining the articles and the

¹ <http://heavy.com/news/2015/07/cecil-the-lion-dead-killed-murdered-hunted-walter-palmer-hunter-minnesota-dentist-photos-video-cubs-zimbabwe-cecil-the-lion-obituary-fundraiser-laws-tribute/>, accessed 28 October 2016.

² <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/nl/821/738/351/demand-justice-for-cecil-the-lion-in-zimbabwe/>, accessed 28 October 2016.

³ <https://www.amazon.com/Cecils-Pride-Craig-Hatkoff/dp/1338034456>, accessed 25 November 2016.

nature 2.0 spaces they investigate, we hope to foreground some of these themes and insights.

2. Nature 2.0 spaces

A crucial element of the spaces opened up through nature 2.0 is that different actors co-create space by simultaneously producing and consuming (or 'prosuming') new natures. 'Prosumption', according to [Ritzer and Jurgenson \(2010: 14\)](#), "involves *both* production and consumption rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption)". Since the production of these co-created spaces is mediated through the Internet, they can refer to a dizzying complexity of the absolute, relative and relational dynamics of space *all at the same time* (see also [Igoe, 2013](#); [Goodman et al., 2016](#); [Elliot, 2016](#)). We only have to briefly refer to the spaces investigated by the articles in this special issue to illustrate this point, and to give a hint of the complex natures that may result.

In their article, 'From selfie to #sealfie', Roberta Hawkins and Jennifer Silver analyze the space opened up through the #Sealfie Twitter hashtag. This hashtag was used to "challenge the authority of organizations and individuals who advocate an end to commercial sealing in Canada" (page # TBD - 6) and so allow indigenous Canadian seal hunters to challenge anti-sealing celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres directly. Creative use of hashtags, Hawkins and Silver show, can and do change environmental politics in favour of those normally marginalised in global debates. In her article, 'Stop FEMA Now,' Melissa Checker also looks at nature 2.0 as a space that can enable activism and empowerment. She shows how social media "played a crucial and sometimes unexpected role in enabling activists to organize across difference", (page # TBD - 1) when challenging neoliberal policies that led to, and were reinforced after, the Hurricane Sandy flood disaster along the eastern seaboard of the United States in October/November 2012. Nature 2.0, in these cases, opens up space, including for less powerful actors.

A different form of activism/empowerment seems to play an important role in Robert Fletcher's article, 'Gaming conservation', about digital games for rainforest conservation. He studies the space of digital (video and computer) games that were in part developed to overcome 'a rising "nature-deficit disorder" (NDD)' (page # TBD - 3) and so spur younger people in particular to become more active in their support for conservation. However, Fletcher shows that engagement with digital games in this way can create what he calls a "false sense of agency", "in that belief in the efficacy of one's prosumption may discourage more active engagement in the on-the-ground politics of natural resource management" (page # TBD - 2). Something similar can also be said about the 'do-gooders' in Büscher's article 'Conservation and development 2.0', in which online users employ web 2.0 platforms to crowd-source funding for their favourite conservation or development project. However, in the particular case investigated, 'agency' online - focused on creating an elephant corridor between Botswana and Zambia - is completely contradictory to offline realities, where it is clear that the type of corridor imagined online is not and will never be possible. In both these articles, therefore, nature 2.0 becomes a thoroughly contradictory space whereby seeming online empowerment falls flat against the offline realities they are supposed to relate to or influence.

Ingrid Nelson's and Elizabeth Lunstrum's articles both focus on nature 2.0 spaces produced around particular charismatic animals—gorillas and rhinos respectively—and the way in which online nature 2.0 spaces co-create particular types of environmental politics around these species. In Lunstrum's article 'Feed them to the lions', she looks at how the poaching of rhinos in South Africa has led to online Facebook users 'routinely' advocating

"extreme violence against poachers, ranging from shoot-on-sight policies to outright torture" (page # TBD - 1). This is also a form of online activism, and one that is very obviously highly problematic. Nature 2.0, Lunstrum shows, can become an intensely violent space where the roles of rhinos and humans are inverted in terms of who belongs and who does not belong to the space of the nation-state. She convincingly shows how poachers are pushed into an Agambian 'state of exception' - a reduction to 'bare life' - through nature 2.0 violence on Facebook.

Ingrid Nelson's article, 'Interspecies care and aging in a gorilla 2.0 world', explores earlier and more recent online interactive spaces where a female lowland gorilla named Koko and her companion Dr. Patterson, a developmental psychologist, age, care and conserve together. Their relationship and livelihood depends upon sustained social media engagement, including a website, Facebook, a Twitter account and a YouTube channel. Moreover, they rely on an unfinished site in Hawai'i meant to become 'like Africa' and suitable for retiring primates and conservation scientists, despite the enduring colonial history of this land. And while the spaces described in Nelson's article might appear opposite to those described by Lunstrum, Nelson illustrates that online and offline *caring* practices can also be violent. Moreover, both articles show how nature itself is reimagined through the fame of animals, either as a species (rhinos, but see also the seals in Hawkins and Silver's article) or as individual animals in their own right (Koko, but of course also Cecil the lion as explained above).

The final article analyzes yet a different nature 2.0 space, and emphasizes even more decisively how online and offline come together in nature 2.0. James Stinson's article 'Re-Creating Wilderness 2.0' arguably takes the blurring of online and offline furthest in analysing how "new media technologies, including mobile digital devices, web 2.0 and locative media" intersect "with the practice of wilderness recreation". His argument is that this new space should be seen as a complex "re-creation of a new ontology of augmented nature, made possible by the articulation of elements of the non-human environment, new media and communication technologies, and practices of outdoor recreation" (page # TBD - 3). Yet, and even though this new 'wilderness 2.0' does not and cannot settle into anything permanent or absolute, Stinson shows that it enables new forms of capital accumulation that fit with what [Langley and Leyshon \(in press\)](#) refer to as 'platform capitalism'. Similar to Büscher's article on (online) interactive '2.0' crowdsourcing platforms, both articles see nature 2.0 as a space for new online entrepreneurial work that allow companies and organisations to tap into new forms of 'valuation and capitalisation' that arise from 'digital economic circulation' ([Langley and Leyshon, in press](#): 4).

As is clear from all articles, nature 2.0 spaces bring together a dizzying array of images, actors, places, emotions, practices, politics, powers and technologies, all of which subsequently shape and *co-create* the natures that result. This makes nature 2.0 a complicated space to study, and in this short introduction we do not provide any methodological pointers for doing so (a subject which, in and of itself, would be worth more attention). Rather, we want to finish this introduction by providing several recommendations from the articles in this special issue about how to further the study of nature 2.0. In particular, we want to focus on specific *intensifications* and *contestations* in nature 2.0 spaces and how these encourage/demand new types and practices of environmental politics and for studying nature 2.0 spaces.

3. The cyberpolitics of environmental conservation: intensifications and contestations

As the articles in the special issue show, there are many ways to study nature 2.0. The special issue therefore only scratches the

surface (see also Igoe, 2013; van der Wal and Arts, 2015; Arts et al., 2015; Goodman et al., 2016; Elliot, 2016). Based on the articles, however, we believe that a focus on *intensifications* and *contestations* might be fruitful in further developing the study of nature 2.0 and the spaces it creates and inhabits. We have several reasons: first, a focus on intensification ensures that the study of nature 2.0 is historically informed (intensifications come from somewhere, or work from older/prior dynamics) and does justice to the intensity, speed and circulation of dynamics on the co-created web 2.0. Second, a focus on contestations ensures that nature 2.0 spaces are always viewed in relation to politics and power. And third, a focus on the combination of the two allows for multiple forms of theorization that give nature 2.0 its rightful place within broader understandings of power, politics and political economy in the early 21st century (see Nealon, 2008).

What, then, might this look like in actual analytical practice? If we take up some hints (some explicit, some implicit) from the articles in this issue, we come to several directions for further research. A first pointer is the study of what Goodman et al. (2016: 678) refer to as ‘spectacular environmentalisms’ or the ‘large-scale mediated spectacles about environmental problems’. This means, in practical terms and as nicely summarized by Hawkins and Silver (page # TBD – 4) that “a key analytical task in this case, and one for nature 2.0 scholars more broadly, rests in making sense of multiple images produced by individuals and organizations with varying motivations, amounts of money, degrees of fame and influence, and who [sic] are sometimes dispersed spatially and temporally”.

Following from this, a second pointer for nature 2.0 research should be not only about making sense of multiple images and the ‘spectacular’ natures they produce, but also about the intensity of information and images as a self-standing empirical phenomenon (see Andrejevic, 2013). Hence, we argue that the cyberpolitics of environmental conservation also involves (dealing with) a great deal of ‘noise’, that can leave prosumers ‘swimming’ or overwhelmed with data, provocative images, messages and other material that can lead to a sense of disengagement, exhaustion, retreat, apathy, etc. unless provoked or connected in particular ways. At the same time, we have to be open to the fact that not all spaces are equally intense or contested. The stuff that we might consider normal, routine and banal also significantly shape nature 2.0. The dialectics, tensions, contradictions in and between these dynamics would make for fruitful future nature 2.0 research.

A third and final pointer is the reshaping of a multitude of categories and practices associated with or employed by nature 2.0. As the articles show, our understanding of categories or practices of labour, leisure, activism, volunteering, violence, care, meaning and – more broadly – time and space, change and transform through nature 2.0 dynamics and interactions. Yet, rather than summarize or attempt to be comprehensive, we might pose the question of which practices with whom or what, constitute action in nature 2.0 spaces and what kinds of politics emerge out of such practices? Even more broadly, is the term ‘nature 2.0’ itself not already becoming an ambiguous category now that in some instances, we are morphing towards ‘nature 3.0’, which is no longer just about co-creation, but about simultaneous online collaboration?

4. Looking forward

With new media poised to continue to develop rapidly in the coming years it is clear that the relations between online and offline nature are critical for understanding environmental conservation, global and local environmental politics and human–nature relations in the 21st century. Nature 2.0, in short, is happening and rapidly developing, and we see this special issue as a starting point for the wide range of possible empirical and theoretical analyses that this topic will provide in the coming years. The special issue, we hope, will therefore not only be a major contribution to and milestone in critical conservation studies, political ecology and (new) media geographies, but also suggest promising possibilities for future encounters with nature 2.0.

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