



Virtual nature, violent accumulation: The ‘spectacular failure’ of carbon offsetting at a Ugandan National Park



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ABSTRACT

In East Africa, financially strained governments increasingly experiment with voluntary, market-based carbon offset schemes for enhancing the public management of protected areas. Often, conservationists and governments portray these as ‘triple-win’ solutions for climate change mitigation, biodiversity preservation, and local socioeconomic development. Examining such rhetoric, this paper analyses the rise and decline of an integrated carbon offset and conservation initiative at Mount Elgon National Park in eastern Uganda, involving a partnership between the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) and a Dutch NGO, Face the Future. In doing so, the paper reveals the ways in which the uncompensated dispossession of local residents was a necessary precondition for the project’s implementation. Although external auditors expected the project to sequester 3.73 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e) between 1994 and 2034, conflicts forced the scheme to cease reforestation in 2003. Noting this rapid decline, we problematize the ways in which Face the Future and other carbon market intermediaries represented their activities via project documents and websites, obscuring the violence that was necessary for the project’s implementation. In so doing, we argue that the maintenance of a ‘triple win’ spectacle is *itself* integral to the management of carbon sequestration projects, as it provides consumers with a form of ‘ethical’ use value, and greatly enhances the capacity of carbon market brokers to accumulate exchange value by attracting ‘green’ investors. Consequently, what we term a ‘spectacular failure’ manifests in at least two ways: first, in the unravelling of the heavily mediated spectacle of harmonious, profitable conservation, and, second, in the deleterious nature of the consequences that accrue to local communities and ecosystems alike.

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Introduction

Upon visiting greenseat.nl, the homepage of a Dutch organization that markets carbon offset services to airline, train, and bus passengers, one is immediately greeted with an imperative to ‘travel greener now!’ On this website, and at the mere click of a mouse button, consumers ostensibly pay for both a clear environmental conscience and a healthier atmosphere. At present, GreenSeat markets carbon offsets derived from ‘voluntary’ clean energy projects, such as those involving solar and wind power. Between 1993 and 2003, however, the organization allegedly sold offsets sourced from tree plantations sponsored by a Dutch NGO – now known as ‘Face the Future’ – at Mount Elgon National Park in Uganda (Checker, 2009; Faris, 2007; Lang and Byakola, 2006; Sullivan, 2011).¹ Today,

by contrast, one cannot find mention of this initiative in the websites or organizational literature of either GreenSeat or Face the Future. Similarly, recent studies of conservation at Mount Elgon make little or no mention of the project and its relationship to the history of forest governance in the region (Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; Petursson et al., 2011; Petursson et al., 2013a,b; Sassen and Sheil, 2013; Sassen et al., 2013).² What happened? Examining the disappearance of this project from global ecosystem service markets, this paper analyses the rise and decline of Face the Future’s scheme at Mount Elgon; the problematic ways in which it represented its operations via the internet; and the violence that was simultaneously experienced by local people.

Such an inquiry is warranted, we claim, given that similar attempts to link Ugandan protected areas to a global “economy of repair” (Fairhead et al., 2012, 242) through carbon markets have decidedly exhibited what MacDonald (2013) – following the philosophers Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek – terms “cynical

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¹ ‘Face the Future’ was originally known as the Forest Absorbing Carbon Emissions (FACE) Foundation (see also Lang and Byakola (2006) and <http://www.face-thefuture.com>).

² Sassen et al. (2013, 260) note the existence of the UWA-FACE project in a summary table of the last one hundred years of conservation governance at Mount Elgon, but do not further examine or explain its disappearance.

reason”, or strategic attachment to a disingenuous set of rhetorical claims. Differently put, although brokers of the voluntary carbon market frame these initiatives as a ‘triple-win’ for biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and socioeconomic development (National Forestry Authority [NFA], 2011; Uganda Wildlife Authority [UWA], 2011), a growing body of evidence documents the deleterious consequences of forest conservation for local populations in both Uganda and elsewhere in East Africa (Benjaminsen and Bryceson, 2012; Benjaminsen et al., 2013; Beymer-Farris and Bassett, 2012; Brockington, 2002; Gardner, 2012; Igoe and Croucher, 2007; Nel and Hill, 2013; Neumann, 1998; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006). Likewise, NGOs and activists have published controversial accounts of the dispossession of rural populations for Ugandan carbon offset forestry projects in particular (Friends of the Earth, 2012; Lang and Byakola, 2006; Nel and Sharife, 2012), including the notable case of more than 20,000 people allegedly evicted for a project managed by a British firm, the New Forests Company (Carrere, 2009; Oxfam International, 2011). In such instances, it would appear that these exploitative attempts to pursue carbon offset forestry in Uganda are emblematic of both ‘green grabbing’ processes (Fairhead et al., 2012) and the ‘global land grab’ more broadly (e.g. Borras et al., 2011).

The primary objective of this paper, however, is not *only* to present an empirical account of green grabbing. Additionally, we focus on what Corson et al. (2013, 5) term “grabbing green”, or on the various “inter-relations, systemics, logics, and mechanisms” that both UWA and Face the Future have utilized to pursue their respective agendas under a global environmentalist mandate, and how these mechanisms ultimately unravelled. Indeed, these organizations’ representation of carbon offset forestry as a ‘triple win’ is no simple task, as it necessarily entails the enrolment and stabilization of a vast network of actors, technologies, expertise, and institutions. In other words, these projects denote the need for “socially necessary abstractions” (Robertson, 2012, 389), or the conceptual output of processes of measurement and representation that allow certain aspects of ecosystems to be isolated, standardized, and circulated through markets. Crucially, the production of these abstractions is a profoundly *virtual* process, or an attempt “to make the world around us look like and conform to an abstract model of it” (MacDonald and Corson, 2012, 160). Such virtualism has characterized efforts to conserve biodiversity at least since the colonial era (West et al., 2006), in which fundamentally Western or ‘modern’ (Latour, 1993) conceptions of the distinction between nonhuman ‘nature’ and human ‘society’ were territorialized in the form of protected areas (Adams and Hutton, 2007). Yet, new technologies add a novel dimension to these already virtual processes, best encapsulated perhaps by the term “Nature 2.0” (Büscher, 2013). Through conservation websites and blogs, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, and the integration of conservation finance into everyday consumptive practices (Igoe, 2013), consumers increasingly experience nature itself as a spectacle, or as a series of consumable images and representations (Sullivan, 2013).³ In many ways, conservation has thus become ‘spectacularized’, generating profits through what we might term ‘spectacular accumulation’ (Igoe, 2010, 378; Tsing, 2000, 139), as it increasingly relies upon an array of mediating technologies to link capital with the often-distant places that it is now meant to conserve.

In relation to the synthesis of carbon offsetting and more conventional forms of biodiversity conservation, spectacular

accumulation operates through representations of the presumed global commensurability of greenhouse gas emissions (Bumpus and Liverman, 2011; Fairhead et al., 2012). That is, through a series of abstractions that allow one tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e) emitted by industry in the Global North to be rendered as precisely equivalent to another sequestered by forests (or via an alternative scheme) in various ‘frontier’ (Tsing, 2005, 59) regions of the Global South. This point should not be misunderstood as a methodological critique – we do not question that forests at least temporarily sequester carbon dioxide in the amounts estimated by project managers, although many analysts have raised salient technical issues related to carbon leakage and permanence (Ascuí and Lovell, 2011; Bachram, 2004; Galik and Jackson, 2009; Lovell and Liverman, 2010). Rather, we contribute to this rapidly growing literature by arguing that spectacularization constitutes a *necessary* component of the production of a carbon offset. As we will see, the maintenance of a ‘triple win’ spectacle is itself integral to the management of carbon sequestration projects, as it provides consumers with a form of ‘ethical’ use value, and greatly enhances the capability of carbon market brokers to generate exchange value by attracting ‘green’ investors. Consequently, when these projects fail to maintain a coherent triple-win representation, what we term a ‘spectacular failure’ manifests in two interrelated ways: first, in the unravelling of the heavily mediatized imagery of harmonious, profitable conservation, and, second, in the extent of the deleterious consequences that accrue to local communities and ecosystems alike.

This argument is supported in five sections. First, we examine recent approaches to the political ecology of carbon offsetting, and draw particular attention to the ways in which these processes necessarily involve spectacular forms of accumulation. Second, we highlight the ways in which the violent and uncompensated dispossession of local residents was a necessary precondition for the UWA-FACE project’s implementation, effectively constituting a process of interrelated accumulation and *naturalization* by dispossession. Third, we identify a number of antinomies between the ‘triple-win’ rhetoric that characterized the FACE Foundation’s literature with UWA’s struggles to contain local resistance and legal challenges to conservation in the area. Fourth, we specifically examine the ‘spectacular failure’ of the UWA-FACE project at Mount Elgon, and present findings regarding the impacts of these activities on both forest plantations and local communities. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of these events for other proposed schemes to trade in carbon offsets over voluntary markets in East Africa and elsewhere.

Virtual nature, or: Why carbon forests have spectacular social lives

Much recent work in political ecology has critically engaged with the production of ostensibly ‘socio-natural’ commodities (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Büscher and Arsel, 2012; Büscher et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2012; Peluso, 2012; Roth and Dressler, 2012), and especially so within the politicized context of global environmental change (McAfee, 2012; Peet et al., 2011). Following influential conceptualizations by Castree (e.g. 2003b, 2008) and McCarthy and Prudham (2004), these inquiries increasingly share an interest with the ways in which new ‘green’ markets result in both the reproduction of old-, and the generation of new-, inequalities, dispossessions, or restrictions of access to natural resources (Büscher et al., 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012). Interestingly, then, rather than constituting a radical limit for capital accumulation (O’Connor, 1988), this literature interrogates the ways in which the environment frequently now provides a new frontier for the generation of surplus value (Sullivan, 2013), and/or a

³ See, for example, the new website launched by the Uganda Wildlife Authority with assistance from USAID’s Sustainable Tourism in the Albertine Rift (STAR) programme, featuring built-in connectivity for a variety of social media platforms, as well as endorsements from TripAdvisor, CNNTravel, National Geographic, and Lonely Planet (<http://ugandawildlife.org/>).

'spatial-environmental fix' for the resolution of intertwined economic and ecological crises elsewhere in the capitalist system (Harvey, 2003; Smith, 2007). Consequently, these concerns further compound related discussions about both climate and environmental justice, which seek to prevent the mitigation of largely Northern-induced processes of global environmental change at the expense of vulnerable communities in the developing world (Agarwal and Narain, 1991; Beymer-Farris and Bassett, 2012; Marino and Ribot, 2012).

To understand the complex ways in which these concerns intersect with the production of carbon offsets, however, we must first examine the basic character of these commodities, which is simultaneously both 'social' and 'natural'. For example, Bumpus (2011, 616) notes four distinct, yet simultaneous, 'types' or dimensions of existence for each individual carbon offset:

"the carbon that continues to be emitted by the offset buyer (type 1); the carbon that would have been emitted if it had not been displaced by the project activity (type 2); the lower emissions as a result of the project activity (type 3); and the tCO₂e (type 4) that is produced by the difference in emissions as a result of the project activity and baseline."

Here, we see that a carbon offset is primarily relational or 'hybrid' (Castree, 2003a), as it necessarily problematizes the conceptual nature-society distinction that Bruno Latour (1993, 29) terms the 'modern constitution'. In the case of reforestation projects, for example, tCO₂e have a material existence in the sense that it is possible to measure the amount of carbon dioxide that is stored in a given portion of forest (Ascuí and Lovell, 2011). However, a given tCO₂e stored in forests is not, clearly, the very same tCO₂e that was released elsewhere in the world. Consequently, in contrast to the biophysical sequestration of carbon dioxide, the *production of a carbon offset* is co-dependent on the (often transnational) construction of relationships between those who emit, those who sequester, and the ecosystems and technologies enrolled by both. If one of these components functions as required, but another falters, the carbon offset unravels as an entity and ceases to exist.

Such co-dependency forces proponents of carbon offsetting to constantly engage in acts of "translation" in order to keep these relationships functioning smoothly (Mosse, 2005, 9). Project managers must constantly employ measurement, certification, and accounting technologies in order to assure the consumers of carbon offsets that they are, in fact, purchasing something that exists (Ascuí and Lovell, 2011; Lovell and MacKenzie, 2011). Yet, for offsetting arrangements that involve afforestation or reforestation, carbon is 'uncooperative' in the sense that it is significantly more difficult to measure and quantify than with other technologies (Bumpus, 2011). This is particularly true in contrast with, for example, the destruction of industrial gases like nitrous oxide and hydrofluorocarbon-23, which is an inherently more controllable and measurable process (Lovell and Liverman, 2010, 258). In particular, forestry projects are specifically afflicted by the twin problems of 'leakage' and 'permanence'; whereas 'leakage' refers to the possibility that deforestation activities will simply be displaced outside the project area, 'permanence' refers to the omnipresent risk of stored carbon being released through fire, disease, pests, human encroachment, or a variety of other contingencies (Galik and Jackson, 2009; Wunder, 2008). Thus, for Bumpus and Liverman (2011, 210), a carbon offset is best conceived as being created through a process of "hemming in" that involves the use of monitoring procedures, baseline calculations, guarantees of

additionality, and robust offset methodologies. When these components become more loosely coupled, the offset's own existence becomes less certain. Consequently, we again see how the existence of a carbon offset is inseparable from the collective functioning of biophysical systems, mediating technologies, and the 'social work' of monitoring, evaluation, auditing, and disseminating results to prospective consumers through interactive websites, applications, and blogs.

We note, moreover, that it is precisely in relation to the latter task that the business of carbon offsetting necessarily proceeds through practices of spectacular accumulation. Here, we do not draw a simple distinction between 'actual' empirical realities and falsely spectacular representations of these by conservationists and their financiers. Rather, following Igoe's (2010, 376) reading of Debord (1967) and Tsing (2000, 2005), spectacles are "not different and separate from the conditions that they portray, they are produced by them and, in turn, define and reproduce them." As such, we instead encounter a virtual relationship between the biophysical world and instrumental representations of it, wherein the spectacle of 'pristine' carbon-sequestering landscapes enables the generation of resources to both create new enclosures and more effectively govern existing ones. In other words, financial transfers for carbon offsetting must be "imagined" or "conjured" before they can be actualized, creating a situation in which, as Tsing (2000, 118) puts it, "[t]he more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy."

Hence, although conservationists' attempts to produce such an 'investment frenzy' have rendered a commodified version of African 'nature' more visible to international audiences than ever before, this spectacular set of images and representations is thoroughly fetishized. Of course, for Marx (1995 [1867], 47), commodity fetishism refers to the ways in which capitalist production masks the social relations implicated in the production of a particular good or service, where "the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour." In other words, fetishism occurs when commodities are consumed "without reference to the relationships and contexts from which they were produced" (Igoe, 2010, 378). In the case of markets for ecosystem services, therefore, fetishization obscures the ways in which both legal and extra-legal violence and dispossession are often necessary to implement the land use changes required for the production of carbon offsets and similar commodities (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Springer, 2013).

When the political-ecological relations of exploitative carbon offsetting initiatives are rendered visible, however, what we will term a 'spectacular failure' ensues. This entails, first, the unraveling of the heavily mediatized imagery of harmonious, profitable conservation often presented in websites and project documents. Yet, such failures are also 'spectacular' in an additional sense; that is, in the extent to which they reveal an enormous gap between 'representation' and 'execution' in project activities, and the ways in which this gap entails deleterious consequences for local communities and ecosystems alike. Subsequent portions of this paper provide an empirical discussion of such a 'spectacular failure' by analysing a voluntary carbon offset and conservation scheme at Mount Elgon National Park (MENP), known as the Uganda Wildlife Authority-Forest Absorbing Carbon Emissions (UWA-FACE) project. In doing so, we seek to problematize the ways in which the UWA-FACE project represented the political-ecological relations that governed the project's sequestration of carbon dioxide to prospective consumers of the resulting carbon credits.

Naturalization by dispossession? The commodification of carbon sequestration at Mount Elgon, Uganda⁴

In 1992, a Dutch NGO – the Forest Absorbing Carbon Emissions (FACE) Foundation⁵ – approached the Ugandan Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Industry (MoTTI) with a proposition to reforest degraded sections of the Mount Elgon Forest Park.^{6,7} The FACE Foundation knew that many of Uganda's protected areas were severely degraded during the tumultuous post-independence period, and during the civil war that eventually brought current President Yoweri Museveni to power in 1986. At Mount Elgon, this damage was particularly substantial, as approximately 25,000 ha of the reserve's forest cover were lost during this time (Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; White, 2002). Since Uganda's economy also suffered greatly during this period, few internal revenues were available for the rehabilitation of national parks and forest reserves. Indeed, the World Bank notably ranked Uganda as the worst performing economy in Sub-Saharan Africa for the period between 1961 and 1989 (Norgrove, 2002, 70–71), and the implications for the government's capacity were understandably substantial.

As a result, the MoTTI favorably received the FACE Foundation's interest in Mount Elgon. According to the original contract between these two parties (FACE Foundation, 1992), FACE agreed to cover the costs of reforestation, including those incurred for labor and procurement. In return, the MoTTI and its subsidiary, Uganda National Parks (UNP),⁸ were required to relinquish the rights to market the carbon dioxide stored in the new forest compartments, and to guarantee the security of these new plantations for a period of 99 years. Further, the contract stipulated that these compartments would sequester a minimum of “5500 kg CO₂ per hectare per year” (FACE Foundation, 1992, 7). As noted earlier, carbon credits generated by this scheme were also allegedly marketed via a Dutch organization known as GreenSeat – which sells voluntary carbon offsets to airline, bus, and rail passengers – and its parent organization, the Climate Neutral Group (Checker, 2009, 46; Lang and Byakola, 2006, 9; Sullivan, 2011, 336). As such, prospective consumers were ostensibly invited to “travel greener” by purchasing carbon credits from the FACE Foundation's plantations at Mount Elgon (GreenSeat, 2012).

Presumably unbeknownst to many potential consumers, however, the Dutch Electricity Generating Board (known as ‘N.V. Sep’) originally established the FACE Foundation in 1990 (FACE Foundation, 2000, 2001a). Officially, N.V. Sep's objective was to ensure that the foundation would “provide enough CO₂ credits from afforestation and reforestation projects to offset the CO₂ emissions from a new coal fired power station” in the Netherlands

(Société Générale de Surveillance [SGS] Agrocontrol, 2001, 4).⁹ Although the FACE Foundation formally “decoupled” from N.V. Sep in 2000 (FACE Foundation, 2001a), European electricity firms apparently continued to constitute a large portion of the FACE Foundation's clientele (FACE Foundation, 2000, 2001a). Unsurprisingly, the organization generally downplays this connection with coal-fired electricity generation, and asserts that its main objective “is to establish and protect forests [...] sustainably and responsibly, in suitable areas, wherever in the world, and by so doing to contribute to reducing the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere” (FACE Foundation, 2001a, 2). Thus, although the organization is ‘non-profit’ in a strictly technical sense, the foundation is only thinly separated from the for-profit apparatus of N.V. Sep and its other clients, who increasingly seek to reduce environmental criticisms of their operations without changing the core of their business practices, perhaps also increasing their competitiveness over firms that are not so ‘environmentally savvy’ in the process.

In the early 1990s, this type of contract was virtually unprecedented in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the world's first voluntary carbon offset arrangement was implemented only a few years prior in 1989, in an agreement signed between the AES Corporation (a US electricity firm) and an agroforestry project in Guatemala managed by CARE International (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008, 133). Also a pioneer, the FACE Foundation had established a carbon offset forestry projects in Ecuador in 1990 (Bumpus, 2004), and perceived Uganda's newfound political stability as a potentially feasible entry-point for expanding their operations to East Africa. Given that the UNFCCC itself was only established after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and the Kyoto Protocol even later in 1997, these activities long preceded the ‘compliance’ carbon offset schemes initiated under the framework of the UNFCCC and its Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). As the ensuing discussion aims to show, however, the ‘triple-win’ spectacle of the FACE Foundation's project was undermined by the manner in which its activities were ultimately implemented. Specifically, the violent evictions that characterized this process of (re)naturalization on Mount Elgon suggest that one might accurately describe these events as a form of “primitive accumulation” (Corson and MacDonald, 2012; Kelly, 2011), or environmentally-justified “accumulation by dispossession” (Benjaminsen and Bryceson, 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012). This holds both in relation to the outright enclosure of land and resources, and the alteration of conservation institutions in ways that restricted local access to livelihood-supporting resources such as water, fuelwood, and non-timber forest products – all the while creating new sources of income for UWA and the FACE Foundation.

Accumulation by dispossession, selective history, and the (re)production of ‘nature’ at Mount Elgon

Within a year of the original MoTTI-FACE Foundation contract being signed in November 1992, the Ugandan government resolved to upgrade Mount Elgon to national park status, and to remove ‘encroachers’ from within its boundaries (Gosalamang et al., 2008; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; White, 2002). Although it is difficult to retrospectively open up the strategic ‘black box’ surrounding this decision (Mosse, 2005, 20), one should note the correlation between financial incentives provided by both the FACE

⁴ Empirical findings in this section are the result of fieldwork conducted by the first author during September–December 2009 and July–December 2011, consisting of 53 semi-structured interviews, content analyses of project documents, and five focus group discussions with UWA-FACE plantation-adjacent communities. First, data on the establishment of UWA-FACE forest compartments at Mount Elgon, their distribution around the protected area, and local encroachment were gathered through semi-structured interviews with employees of the Uganda Wildlife Authority and other Ugandan environmental management agencies, as well as through content analyses of official documents, accounts, and project records.

⁵ The FACE Foundation has since rebranded itself as ‘Face the Future’.

⁶ According to Lang and Byakola (2006, 59), this initial series of negotiations was brokered by one Jan Bettlem, a Dutch national then working as a Technical Advisor for IUCN in Uganda.

⁷ Mount Elgon Forest Reserve was re-designated as a Forest Park in 1991, and as a National Park in 1992–3.

⁸ Uganda National Parks later merged with the Game Department to form the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) in 1996, in accordance with the 1996 Uganda Wildlife Statute.

⁹ In March 2008, the Dutch television programme ‘Zembla’ aired a documentary on Dutch coal-fired electricity and carbon offsetting at Mount Elgon, entitled ‘Het CO₂ Alibi [The CO₂ Alibi]’ (available at <http://zembla.incontxt.nl/seizoenen/2008/afleveringen/02-03-2008>). The programme generated significant public controversy in the Netherlands, which in turn paralleled international debates following the publication of a widely-read report by Chris Lang and Timothy Byakola (2006) for the World Rainforest Movement.

Foundation and other donors, such as USAID's (1991) US\$ 30 million National Action Plan for the Environment (NAPE),¹⁰ and the Government of Norway's support to the Mount Elgon Conservation and Development Programme (MECDP), which was first implemented in conjunction with IUCN in 1988 (White and Hinchley, 2001). Indeed, among scholars of conservation and natural resource management in East Africa, substantial debates exist regarding whether such decisions are generally 'organic', or undertaken largely at the behest of international pressures from NGOs and donors (Gibson, 1999; Gosalamang et al., 2008). The reality is complex, and, we assert, arises in response to varying combinations of the interests of political elites, NGOs, multilateral and bilateral donors, and the financial incentives provided by these actors.

In contrast to the multiplicity of these interests, however, the process of upgrading the Mount Elgon Forest Park to a National Park in 1993 was singularly violent. Beginning in 1993, the 25,000 ha of degraded parkland targeted for reforestation by the FACE Foundation were cleared of 'encroachers' by paramilitary UNP rangers and National Resistance Army¹¹ soldiers (Norgrove, 2002; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; White, 2002). These evictions were reportedly characterized by widespread violence and human rights abuses, and may have involved little or no prior warning at many locations (Himmelfarb, 2012; Hurinet Uganda, 2011; Lang and Byakola, 2006; Norgrove, 2002; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; Vangen, 2009). While the Ugandan Constitution and relevant land-use legislation afford the right to the state to seize land when it is deemed to be in the national interest (Government of Uganda, 1995; Hunt, 2004; Okuku, 2006), they also stipulate that both due warning and compensation must be provided to evictees. Official records of the evictions were not kept, however, and estimates now vary regarding the exact number of people displaced. For instance, Checker (2009, 45) – reviewing empirical work by Himmelfarb (2006, 16) – claims that the project resulted in the eviction of 6000 people. This figure is also cited by Sullivan (2011, 336). However, Himmelfarb's fieldwork was limited only to a specific portion of the northern edge of Mount Elgon National Park, known as the Benet Resettlement Area, which is located in two of the least populated of the eight districts that currently border the protected area (Uganda Communications Commission [UCC], 2010). Indeed, estimates of human displacement from the national park as a whole tend to be much higher: Vangen (2009, 135) roughly estimates that the overall figure could exceed 150,000 persons. Likewise, Sean White (2002, 2–3) – then IUCN's Chief Technical Advisor for the Mount Elgon region – estimates that the 25,000 ha of encroached forest could have fed as many as 84,000 households, or approximately 580,000 people at current household sizes. Regardless of the exact extent of the evictions, communities were not provided with official compensation either for the loss of land and property, nor for injuries sustained as a result of the evictions (Gosalamang et al., 2008, 44). Finally, one should note that while the bulk of these activities occurred in 1993, lower intensity paramilitary evictions continued over the next decade, and especially when the 1993 boundary was re-gazetted in 2002–3 with financial assistance from the World Bank's Protected Areas Management for Sustainable Use (PAMSU) programme (Cavanagh, 2012; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; White, 2002). Such paramilitary activities continue to prevent access to land, cultural sites, and forest resources in territory that was formerly occupied by communities.

Conversely, the Ugandan government and UNP¹² claim that these evictions were perfectly legal, and that allegations of abuse remain unproven. For UNP, especially, inhabitants of the Mount Elgon Forest Park were perceived as 'squatters' or 'encroachers', who simply and illegally appropriated public land for their own private use (NFA, 2011; UWA, 2009a, 2011). However, this position is complicated by our archival research on Mount Elgon's management history. First, as noted in the original working plan for the Mount Elgon Forest Reserve (Webster, 1954, 6),

“[r]ather unwillingly, the [Forest] Department agreed to a field investigation early in 1940 by an administrative officer and a forest officer. As a result of their recommendations, the [park boundary] line was adjusted in twenty places between Bulago and Bumbo [parishes]. These excisions amounting to about six square miles, were not surveyed nor was the gazetted area or the reserve altered. In addition to the excisions, licenses were issued to about 70 families who were allowed to remain and cultivate in the reserve. These licenses were issued for life and, if the original licensee died, the license could be transferred to one of the sons.”

In addition to such excisions, the 1962 *Public Land Act* and 1969 *Public Lands Act* likewise complicated the overarching tenure situation, as both were often interpreted as affording farmers the right to deforest unoccupied public land for agricultural purposes without prior consent from the government or other authorities (Mugambwa, 2007; Petracco and Pender, 2009, 6). Later, land tenure relations were further destabilized by Idi Amin's 1975 Land Reform Decree, which claimed all land in Uganda as state property (Hunt, 2004, 176; Okuku, 2006, 10–11). In some instances, farmers were encouraged to appropriate land as they pleased, the logic being that this would reduce the dependence of rural populations on the state and mitigate the effects of its increasingly dysfunctional management of the national economy. Simultaneously, Amin's government also simply distributed portions of protected areas to supporters when such actions were deemed politically expedient (Turyahabwe and Banana, 2008, 650). Further, as noted by Norgrove and Hulme (2006, 1098), settlement of the forest reserve also occurred during Milton Obote's second regime, during which allegedly corrupt Forest Department officials sold illegitimate land titles to farmers at Mount Elgon. Today, however, many conservationists systematically ignore these inconvenient pieces of Uganda's land tenure history, and instead strategically adopt a legalistic, uncritical, and ahistorical perspective on communities living within protected areas (see, for example, NFA, 2011 or UWA, 2011). Here, we perhaps see what both Peluso and Lund (2011, 674–676) and Springer (2013, 533) describe as 'law's violence', or the ways in which the law itself can be utilized as a tool of dispossession, especially when it overwrites traditional and customary forms of land possession and use.

In light of such violence, one can observe “conservation practice as primitive accumulation” (Kelly, 2011) at Mount Elgon in two distinct forms: (i) in the uncompensated expropriation of land and physical assets; and (ii) in the expropriation of rights of access to common property resources. Indeed, whereas the former component is well documented in the social scientific literature on conservation at Mount Elgon, researchers have frequently analyzed the latter only in the economic sense, as a lost asset for park-adjacent household economies. In a political-economic sense, however, the expropriation of rights to common property also entails the proletarianization of subsistence farmers, or the heightened exposure of their household's demand for basic commodities

¹⁰ With this programme, USAID played a crucial role in both financing and conceptualizing Uganda's initiative to regain control over its protected areas. In the original grant document, USAID (1991) emphasizes the need to clearly demarcate the boundaries of reserves, remove existing encroachers, and involve nongovernmental organizations in the management of protected areas.

¹¹ The National Resistance Army was renamed the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) in 1995, and is Uganda's official military force.

¹² UNP and the Game Department merged to form the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) in 1996. Here, we refer to actions undertaken by UNP, as they occurred prior to the passing of the 1996 Uganda Wildlife Statute.

(such as food, fuelwood, herbs, other non-timber forest products) to market forces. Differently put, whereas households would otherwise acquire these inputs by accessing commonly-owned stocks in forest locations, the expropriation of these access rights forces households to acquire such resources through market transactions, and further embeds them within the cash-based economy. In addition, while one could object to the status of conservation enclosure as primitive accumulation on the grounds that it involves the creation of public rather than private property (Kelly, 2011, 687), evictions at Mount Elgon enabled the generation of exchange value through the sale of both carbon offsets and ecotourism experiences. Differently put, while seized land and forests were not privatized, they were certainly commodified and marketized (Castree, 2008). Further, although the expropriated land was converted from customary to public property, the benefit stream resulting therefrom was appropriated by a variety of state, nongovernmental, and private actors.¹³ In essence, then, this constitutes a process of both accumulation and *naturalization* by dispossession, in which the removal of smallholding farmers enabled the production of a 'pristine' landscape for both tourists and brokers of the then-emerging carbon market, such as the FACE Foundation.

Indeed, 'degraded' areas of the forest reserve had not been merely stripped of forest cover. In many cases, communities had established permanent human settlements within the reserve's boundaries, including homesteads, schools, trading centers, and basic health facilities (Himmelfarb, 2012). In the process of evictions, UNP and NRA personnel razed these structures (Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; Vangen, 2009), and it is conceivable that their ruins were still present when reforestation activities began in 1994. Yet, the FACE Foundation continues to deny that its organization's activities have had any impact on land use conflicts at Mount Elgon. For example, when the first author contacted one of the organization's Netherlands-based executives in an attempt to record the FACE Foundation's perspective, he curtly responded as follows:

"If you are doing fieldwork I suggest you contact UWA. [...] We do not have a role in the conflict, but were only involved in a reforestation project" (FACE Foundation executive, email communication, 11.09.2011).

Unsurprisingly, evicted populations resent the violent nature of this process, and do not relish enduring attempts to obscure the relationship between the region's history of uncompensated eviction and existing carbon offset projects. In further developing this discussion, the next section examines the ways in which UWA and the FACE Foundation selectively ignored such inconvenient aspects of the region's resource management history, instead focusing rather disingenuously on the 'benefits' that were said to accrue to local populations.

Maintaining a 'triple-win' spectacle

Despite the exceedingly violent and ongoing nature of this process of naturalization by dispossession, UWA and the FACE Foundation continued to represent their activities as an unreservedly 'triple-win' case of integrated conservation and carbon offsetting. For instance, nearly a decade after large-scale evictions took place on Mount Elgon, the FACE Foundation's 2001 annual report declared that the

"involvement of the owners and local population are crucial factors to the success of projects. Because these parties have a

social and economic interest in maintaining the forest, Face pays much attention to the project region's social-economic context when selecting its locations [...] Besides the sequestration of CO₂, the forest offers other benefits to the local environment, including social and economic development such as employment" (FACE Foundation, 2001a, 2).

In addition, a project brochure describes UWA-FACE's activities at Mount Elgon National Park and related initiative at Kibale National Park thusly:

"The government has re-enforced the integrity of the national parks in the early 1990s. Since 1994 a large number of local tree species are being planted by the projects to rehabilitate the forests and their habitats for plants and animals, therewith enhancing biodiversity. The projects collaborate with IUCN, which supports conservation and sustainable development programs with the adjacent farmer communities [...] The FACE Foundation owns the CO₂ credits, while the forest and all other proceeds belong to UWA" (FACE Foundation, n.d.-a).

Moreover, concerning its rationale for choosing Mount Elgon as a project area, another FACE Foundation annual report simply notes that "one quarter of the area of the national park is damaged. The areas that will not recover naturally in the short term are being replanted by UWA-Face" (FACE Foundation, 2000, 12). Indeed, neither these brochures and annual reports – nor the contracts signed between UWA and FACE (FACE Foundation, 1992, 2001b) – make any mention of the violent and fiercely contested removal of settled agrarian communities from the areas slated for reforestation. Only passing mention of the disputed park boundary can be found in another early, undated project brochure, which somewhat cryptically notes that between "1988 and 1992 the boundary of the forest reserve was resurveyed and planted with eucalyptus trees. Agricultural encroachments were for the greater part terminated, while a sustainable development programme was initiative to improve the local livelihoods" (FACE Foundation, n.d.-b).

Yet, documents produced by the Uganda Wildlife Authority suggest that the scale and character of these evictions may have been well-known to the FACE Foundation. In a retrospective overview of project activities, for example, UWA (2011) argues that the project was necessary precisely as a consequence of agricultural encroachment and settlement of the protected area, and that conflicts arising as a result of evictions posed perhaps the greatest challenge to reforestation activities. "There are conflicts/disagreement about the ownership of land along the Park boundary", the report's authors write, resulting in a "feeling among some of the local communities that they have lost property [...] people feel they have the right to cultivate crops and as such they have sued the government for grabbing their ancestral land" (UWA, 2011, 4).

Here, UWA refers to a series of lawsuits targeting Mount Elgon National Park and the Ugandan Attorney General that were launched by communities in the Manafwa, Sironko, and Kapchorwa districts in the early 2000s. In the latter case, ActionAid and an NGO known as the Uganda Land Alliance supported local communities, which resulted in a favorable consent judgment – delivered in 2005 – that recognized the community as the "historical and indigenous" inhabitants of the Mount Elgon forest (see Cultural Survival, 2005; Okwaare and Hargreaves, 2009). Lawsuits launched by two groups of farmers in Manafwa district and one in Sironko district have also been ongoing for nearly a decade, and court injunctions were granted in the mid-2000s to prevent further evictions and destruction of community property by UWA.

Given that the plaintiffs in each of these cases formally named UWA and its personnel at Mount Elgon as respondents, relevant staff members have been required to attend relevant court proceedings, as the first author witnessed during fieldwork in 2011.

¹³ For a discussion of the ways in which primitive accumulation through conservation often involves the appropriation of benefit streams from land and natural resources rather than the appropriation of those resources *as such*, see also Benjaminsen and Bryceson (2012).

Consequently, UWA retains a detailed understanding of the nature of these conflicts, and their potential impacts on UWA-FACE reforestation activities in the corresponding sections of Sironko and Manafwa districts. And yet, these grievances have not been identified as challenges in sections of relevant annual reports and general management plans that relate to the governance of the UWA-FACE project (see [FACE Foundation, 2000, 2001a,b](#); [UWA, 2000, 2009a,b](#)). In short, the violence entailed in evictions from land slated for reforestation, the launching of lawsuits against UWA, and related conflicts are facts of material significance that appear to have been simply excluded from FACE Foundation documents, thereby preventing prospective consumers and donors from fully appreciating the controversial status of forest conservation at Mount Elgon. Further problematizing these omissions, the next section proposes several related mechanisms that eventually led to the collapse of the project's ability to conceal such conflicts, and thus also to internationally market its carbon offsets to consumers.

Uncooperative carbon, unruly people: Dissecting the 'spectacular failure' of the UWA-FACE project

Beginning in 1995, the UWA-FACE¹⁴ project established reforestation targets of 1000 ha per year ([Fig. 1](#)). Generally, these were either achieved or exceeded until the year 2000, after which reforestation activities began to decline. By 2004, UWA-FACE restoration had almost entirely ceased, despite reformulated management targets of 500 ha per year.

Essentially, the decline of the UWA-FACE project began when its managers sought certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) for its carbon offset operations at Mount Elgon National Park in 2000. By the late 1990s, consumers had already grown sceptical of both the environmental and social benefits of carbon offsetting, and the FACE Foundation felt that such doubts could be allayed if they opened their operations to a rigorous audit. Accordingly, as part of the FSC certification process, the UWA-FACE project was subjected to a series of independent examinations by the Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS) Agrocontrol (and later by SGS Qualifor), one of the world's largest and most respected inspection firms.

In a 2001 appraisal, the assessors concluded – based on the plantations established at the time – that the project would sequester 3.73 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over the first certification period, which was deemed to last until 2034 ([SGS Agrocontrol, 2001, 36–45](#)). Of these, 1.62 million credits were set aside as a 'risk buffer', so that the remaining "2.11 million *virtually risk free* GHG credits...[could be] delivered between 1996 and 2034" – at which time plantations were due for re-inspection ([SGS Agrocontrol, 2001, 9, emphasis added](#)).

Yet, as interceding years have shown, the claim that these credits were "virtually risk free" was highly problematic. Indeed, the SGS auditors themselves originally raised a number of substantive concerns about the future security of UWA-FACE plantations, which led them to propose two "corrective actions" – one major and one minor – before the FSC could grant certification ([SGS Agrocontrol, 2001, 57–58](#)). These concerns revolved around the 'major' lack of a preexisting social impact assessment for UWA-FACE activities, and the 'minor' lack of a robust environmental impact assessment of the project's ability to guarantee the sequestration of carbon dioxide. Regarding the social impacts of the project, the assessors noted, simply, that UWA-FACE's "[s]ocial impact assessment is not adequate. Negative social impacts have not been identified and steps have not been taken to reduce those negative impacts" ([SGS Agrocontrol, 2001, 55](#)). Essentially, it was clear to

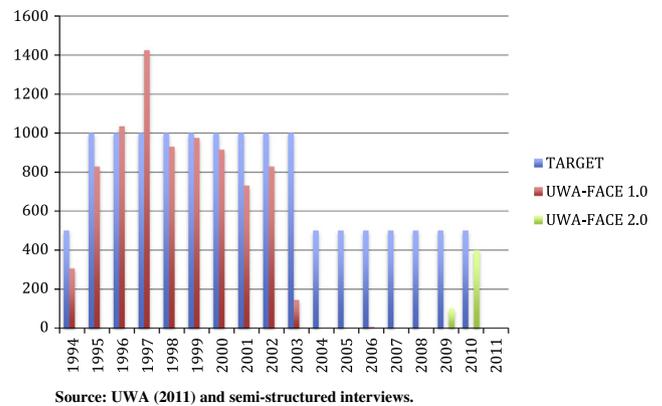


Fig. 1. Actual UWA-FACE reforestation vs. management targets (in hectares).

the assessors that neither UWA nor FACE had seriously considered the implications of widespread local resistance to the project for both the consumers of carbon offsets and their actual climate change mitigation effects.

In particular, the auditors raised concerns about "political and social instability", or the ability of both UWA and FACE to protect their new plantations from local encroachment for the proposed period of 99 years. As the report's authors observed,

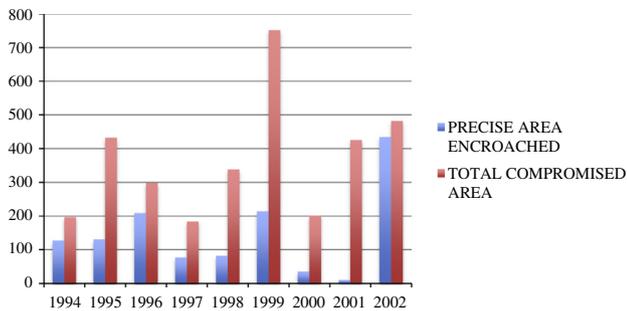
"[t]he political situation in the land surrounding Mt. Elgon is quite tense. There is a very high population density and land for cultivation is in very short supply. The decision to evict encroachers from the National Park has only served to increase the pressure on land outside the park. There is no doubt that local politicians can gain significant support by successfully arguing for a re-alignment of the park boundaries to afford their constituents access to more land" ([SGS Agrocontrol, 2001, 40](#)).

As noted by [Lang and Byakola \(2006, 27\)](#), it would have been virtually impossible to predict, in the early 1900s, the sort of land use regime that would prevail at Mount Elgon in the year 2000. Population dynamics have undergone massive changes, and the region has witnessed incredibly tumultuous political, economic, and social upheavals since the beginning of the 20th century. Among these were the rise and fall of British colonialism; several periods of civil war and recurring *coups d'état*; state-led programmes of political and ethnic cleansing; bio-political crises (such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic); and chronic environmental-social shocks, such as recurring drought and ensuing famines ([Bunker, 1991](#); [Mamdani, 1976](#)). From this perspective, it is arguably both naïve and potentially misleading to offer guarantees to prospective consumers regarding the future sanctity of forest plantations – in a contested region, nonetheless – until the year 2034, much less 2093.

As hindsight now demonstrates, these concerns were well-founded. From the outset of the project, agricultural encroachment and subsequent deforestation constituted omnipresent problems for UWA-FACE's plantations. Project records show that, even in the 1990s, up to 450 ha per year were compromised by community encroachment ([Fig. 2](#)). By 2004, these reforestation targets had become obviously unsustainable, and were beginning to intermingle with allegations of human rights abuse directed at UWA employees.¹⁵ Further, as noted in the previous section, portions of the land

¹⁴ After UNP and the Game Department merged to become UWA in 1996, the FACE Foundation's project at Mount Elgon became known as the 'UWA-FACE project' in policy documents ([UWA, 2009b](#); [FACE Foundation, 2001b](#)).

¹⁵ Here, perhaps the most notable are reports and analysis by [Byakola and Lang \(2006\)](#), [Lang and Byakola \(2006\)](#), [Faris \(2007\)](#), [Honigsbaum \(2007\)](#), and [Checker \(2009\)](#). A highly critical TV programme about the UWA-FACE project was aired by the Dutch programme 'Zembla' in 2008 (available at <http://zembla.incontxt.nl/seizoenen/2008/afleveringen/02-03-2008>), and a documentary film on alleged human rights abuses at Mount Elgon – entitled *Cry from the Ranges* – was released by Hurinet-Uganda in 2009 (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1DTRS09exY>).



Source: UWA (2011) and semi-structured interviews.

Fig. 2. Encroachment into UWA-FACE plantations, 1994–2002.

slated for reforestation had become subject to lawsuits from a number of local communities, and High Court injunctions had made reforestation legally impossible in a number of areas (Hurinet-Uganda, 2011; Okwaare and Hargreaves, 2009).

From a carbon offset marketing perspective, physical encroachment is also compounded by the problem of ‘*de facto* encroachment’, or the manner in which carbon offsets become difficult to ‘translate’ when entire forest compartments are compromised by partial deforestation. For example, while communities physically encroached upon 1137 ha of the UWA-FACE project’s approximately 7500 ha of new plantations by the end of 2002, the total area compromised by such encroachment – when measured in compartments that were compromised – amounted to 3308 ha, or approximately 44% of the total reforested area. When encroachment exceeds the allowance of a predetermined ‘buffer zone’ – which in this case was also 44% of total sequestration capacity (SGS Agrocontrol, 2001) – the amount of carbon sequestered in said compartments may need to be recalculated. Otherwise, the danger arises of issuing carbon credits for environmental services that were not in fact provided. Indeed, when market transactions are involved, to do otherwise would effectively risk engaging in a form of fraud (Bachram, 2004).

In addition, the technical crisis of calculating carbon sequestration is further compounded by the crisis of legitimacy that arises from persistent encroachment. Arguably, the ‘spectacle’ involved in the construction of a market for carbon offsets relies on the ability of individual projects to maintain ‘triple-win’ representations of their activities. Consequently, incentives exist for ‘distancing’ evidence of encroachment from consumers (Kosoy and Corbera, 2010), as such extensive deforestation rightfully poses critical questions of leakage and permanence (Galik and Jackson, 2009), as well as concerns about the human rights and socio-economic wellbeing of adjacent populations. Consequently, one might hypothesize that, rather than retaining equal status, the use value of available tCO₂e offsets quickly declines in relation to increases in experiences with both social contestation and the intentional deforestation of the project area.

Differently put, a significant portion of a carbon offset’s use value is ethical or moral in nature. When consumers purchase carbon offsets, they seek not just a reduction in their carbon footprint, but also the right to advertise their membership in a socially and environmentally responsible community. When offsets derive from contested sources, therefore, use value to the consumer proportionally declines. In this sense, the ‘conjuring trick’ (Tsing, 2000, 118) of carbon offsetting is the production and reproduction of a triple-win representation that purports to simultaneously conserve forests, mitigate climate change, and benefit local people. Individual use value aside, the performance of this spectacle is likewise necessary for the generation of exchange value, given that it is necessary to attract both economic investors and political

supporters. Essentially, then, carbon offsetting reflects what both Tsing (2000) and Igoe (2010) term an ‘economy of appearances’, insofar as its functioning depends of the circulation of virtual representations rather than simply on the production and sale of tangible goods or services.

Further, when this economy of appearances begins to unravel, we encounter what we have termed a ‘spectacular failure’. For example, as a result of the aforementioned contestations and allegations of human rights abuse, no additional trees were planted by the UWA-FACE project between 2004 and 2008. FACE and its financiers were presumably (and understandably) frustrated by the arguable failure of their investment, and UWA was highly cognizant of the negative press being attracted by the scheme. Truly, the manner in which the UWA-FACE project came to a halt during this period is indicative of how vulnerable such initiatives are to the judgments of both the international media and civil society. As one UWA warden explained the decline of the project:

“Their image has been tarnished, so carbon credit operations have halted. You know, it is because of the conflicts and the human rights people crying out, most of them on the internet” (UWA warden, interview 28.07.2011).

Again, since carbon credits enable organizations and individuals to claim ‘carbon neutral’ status, their primary benefit from the consumer’s point of view is that they confer what can be described as ‘normative capital’, or the right to advertise one’s presumably robust ethics. If one overarching lesson from the project’s decline can be drawn, therefore, it is this: If the ethical basis on which these carbon credits are ‘produced’ is challenged – in other words, if they are de-fetishized, de-spectacularized, and have their exploitative political–ecological relations of production exposed – both their use-value for the consumer and exchange value for ‘green’ investors rapidly decline. To avoid this, above all else, a stable ‘translation’ (Mosse, 2005) of the social, political, and ecological relations involved in the offset project must be maintained among all actors involved.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the rise and decline of an integrated carbon offset and conservation scheme at Mount Elgon National Park in eastern Uganda. While the UWA-FACE project advertised itself as a ‘triple win’ for climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and local development (FACE Foundation, 2001a; UWA, 2009b), a political–ecological and historical analysis of the project suggests that such rhetoric is decidedly selective. The main findings of this analysis are three-fold: First, the original forest restoration agreement, signed between the FACE Foundation and the Ugandan government in 1992, was closely followed by one of the largest-scale forest eviction campaigns in Uganda’s post-colonial history. Local people were evicted from the same 25,000 ha of degraded forest that were slated for UWA-FACE rehabilitation, and have not been compensated for the loss of land, property, and livelihoods that accrued as a result, despite potentially valid legal claims to their property. From this perspective, one can therefore perceive the uncompensated dispossession of local people as a simultaneous process of both accumulation and *naturalization* by dispossession, which essentially subsidized the participation of the UWA-FACE project in global carbon offset markets.

Second, in addition to its socially controversial nature, the project was likewise unable to achieve its carbon sequestration objectives. Indeed, only approximately 8000 of 25,000 planned hectares were reforested before the project was forced to cease its operations. By 2004, up to 44% of the project’s newly

established forest compartments had been compromised from a carbon offset perspective, and project activities stalled as a result (UWA, 2011). Such levels of encroachment exceeded the ‘risk buffer’ established by the project’s carbon sequestration auditors (SGS Agrocontrol, 2001), resulting in a high degree of uncertainty regarding the quantity of environmental services rendered. It does not appear that public records were made available by either UWA or FACE about carbon credits exchanged through this scheme prior to 2004, however, and it is thus nearly impossible to retroactively verify whether carbon credits were issued for actually existing environmental services.

Third, these findings present a number of second-order implications for similar forest-based carbon offset schemes in East Africa. Of particular interest is the ways in which brokers of the carbon offset market can attempt to conceal deleterious project effects by maintaining a conceptual and geographical disconnection between offset consumers and actual sites of carbon sequestration. In the Mount Elgon case, such efforts are visible in attempts to disassociate the UWA-FACE project from the violent eviction process that was necessary for its establishment. In effect, such disconnection at least temporarily enabled the FACE Foundation and its collaborators to maintain stable ‘translations’ of offset commodities to consumers and donors, especially in project documents and over the Internet, which obscured the above-discussed social and ecological controversies involved in the project’s implementation.

More broadly, and although a now-expansive body of literature interrogates the oppressive nature of both colonial and early post-colonial conservation in Africa (for a review, see Adams and Hutton, 2007), the violence that marks emerging forms of ‘green grabbing’ remains largely hidden from the international public sphere. Instead, spectacular ‘win-win’ or ‘triple-win’ representations of environmental management and land acquisition dominate conventional academic, donor, and policy-based discourses on the subject (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010; Igoe, 2010; Sullivan, 2013). Thus, the rhetoric of integrated conservation and carbon offsetting is always ‘future positive’ (Mosse, 2005, 1), in that it inexorably advocates for the technical refinement and improvement of projects, as opposed to acknowledging the often-contentious politics implicated in their actual implementation. As noted by Büscher et al. (2012, 16, emphasis original),

“conservation thus becomes an essential contribution to neoliberalism’s most profound contradiction: the ability of its proponents to produce and favor discourses that are seemingly free of contradictions [...] A major part of neoliberalism’s attractiveness and pervasiveness lies precisely in this ability to hybridize and stimulate consensus-oriented discourses, despite their increasingly contradictory realities.”

Indeed, precisely despite evidence of the dispossession and impoverishment of rural populations, organizations such as Face the Future continue to enjoy sterling reputations among Western publics, and are generally presumed to secure environmental management outcomes that conform to their official, allegedly socially responsible rhetoric. Not least, this is evident in the IUCN’s (2012) decision to offset the carbon footprint from its 2012 World Conservation Congress in Jeju, South Korea, by purchasing carbon credits from Face the Future’s plantations in Indonesia. ‘People benefit from the project too,’ the IUCN’s (2012) press release declared, ‘as it creates employment based on forest restoration [...] [i]n short, the project provides a model of how carbon finance can deliver climate change mitigation, while enhancing biodiversity and supporting local livelihoods.’ As we have argued, however, the use of these glossy triple-win representations of conservation constitutes a form of ‘spectacular accumulation,’ given that it generates substantial revenues for government agencies, firms,

and NGOs, but silences a wide range of dissenting voices that cannot be translated into an advertisement for a decidedly neoliberal version of ‘nature’. Accordingly, these findings suggest the need for further critical examinations of attempts to link protected areas to a global “economy of repair” (Fairhead et al., 2012) through markets for ecosystem services, which are capable of identifying other cases of ‘spectacular failure’ in the production and circulation of carbon offsets and other socio-natural commodities.

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