

UJ Sociology, Anthropology & Development Studies

# W E D N E S D A Y

# S E M I N A R

Hosted by the Department of Sociology and the  
Department of Anthropology & Development Studies



Meeting no 09/2014

To be held at 15h30 on Wednesday, 19 February 2014,  
in D-Ring 506, UJ Kingsway campus

## **Nature 2.0: Exploring and Theorizing the links Between New Media and Nature Conservation**

- Please do not copy or cite without authors' permission -

**Prof Bram Büscher**

Erasmus University, Rotterdam

- Programme and other information online at [www.uj.ac.za/sociology](http://www.uj.ac.za/sociology) -

**Paper submission to *New Media and Society*** (word count: 7967)

**Title:** Nature 2.0: Exploring and Theorizing the links Between New Media and Nature Conservation

**Author:** Bram Büscher, Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, the Netherlands, Department of Geography, Environmental Management & Energy Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa; Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Address: Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands, Tel: +31 (0)70 4260 596, Fax: +31 70 426 0799 Email: [buscher@iss.nl](mailto:buscher@iss.nl).

**Abstract:** Web 2.0 and social media applications that allow people to share, co-create and rate online content are crucial new ways for conservation organizations to reach audiences and for concerned individuals and organizations to be (seen as) ‘green’. These developments are rapidly changing the political economy of nature conservation: the production, circulation and consumption of conservation and their social and political effects. By developing the concept of ‘nature 2.0’ and building on empirical insights the paper explores and theorizes these changes. It argues that online activities stimulate and complicate the commodification of biodiversity and help to reimagine ideas, ideals and experiences of (‘pristine’) nature. By exploring the implications of these arguments in relation to several key themes in new media studies, the paper aims to provide building blocks for further investigations into the world of nature 2.0 and the effects of new media on human-nature dynamics more broadly.

**Keywords:** Nature, Conservation, New Media, Commodification, Web 2.0, co-creation

## **Introduction**

Over the last decade, conservation organizations have rapidly adapted to the new media age. Conservation supporters are urged to ‘like’ organizations and their projects on Facebook, build websites around and for their favourite animals, join interactive conservation debates online and retweet important environmental news and campaign slogans. Nature, it seems, is increasingly saved through mouse-clicks and double-taps. Thus, the Nature conservancy urges their supporters to create their own my.nature.org page, which is ‘the intersection between you & nature’<sup>1</sup>; Conservation International asks visitors to ‘connect 4 conservation’ on a online global map, in order to ‘show that people need nature to thrive’<sup>2</sup>; and WWF stimulates followers to ‘take action online with WWF’, promising them that “by adding your voice to our campaigns, together, we can achieve big wins for our planet”.<sup>3</sup> All of them sport the familiar Facebook, twitter, stumble, YouTube and other signs, which offer further ways to interact with these organizations and so ‘save nature’. And they are not alone: nearly all (major) conservation organizations are active on social media nowadays and offer web 2.0 communication and engagement possibilities to (potential) conservation supporters.

Clearly, this trend has implications for the political economy of conservation: the production, circulation and consumption of nature conservation and their social and political effects. Exactly how remains a question, as empirical research on and theorization of this phenomenon have only just commenced (see Igoe, 2010; 2013; Author, 2013). At the same time, research on the social and political-economic dimensions of new media has so far mostly neglected environmental questions and human-nature relations, exemplified amongst others by recent works on (the political economy of) new media (Arvidsson, 2006; Nunes, 2006; Deuze, 2007; Fisher, 2010; Farman, 2012; Couldry, 2012; Arora, 2012) and articles

published in *New Media and Society*. Moreover, the little research that has addressed the links between Internet media and conservation has not yet caught up with the rapid rise of web 2.0 and social media (Weeks, 1999; Luke, 2001; Levitt, 2002). One possible exception, Blewitt's (2010) *Media, Ecology and Conservation*, does not systematically investigate new media.

In this paper I explore and theorize the impacts of social media on the political economy of conservation by positing and developing the concept of 'nature 2.0'. In brief, nature 2.0 aims to capture new online forms and manifestations of what political ecologists refer to as 'second nature': "a nature that is *humanly* produced (through conceptualization as well as activity) and that therefore partakes, but without being entirely, of the human" (Biersack, 2006: 14). The 'new online forms and manifestations' that I am interested in here relate to the reimagining and commodification of nature and its conservation within the political economy of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. I will argue that online conservation dynamics stimulate *and* complicate the commodification of biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes and help to reimagine ideas, ideals and experiences of ('pristine') nature.

In the concluding discussion, the paper uses the nature 2.0 lens to briefly reflect on two key themes in new media studies, namely those around materiality and the argument that 'meaningful distinctions' between "lived and mediated reality are fading" (Deuze, 2007: xii). The purpose is not to discuss and theorize these exhaustively but through critical engagement employ them to provide building blocks for further investigations into the (potential) impact of new media on the political economy of conservation. Given the many global socio-ecological predicaments currently unfolding, I conclude that these critiques and building blocks are highly necessary in order to better understand the prospects and politics of

biodiversity conservation in an era of intense global connectivity and new communicative possibilities.

### **Social Media, ‘web 2.0’ and the political economy of conservation**

According to Fuchs (2008: 17) the “web 2.0 is a phase that is dominated by human communication on the Net”. In contrast, web 1.0 is focused on cognition and web 3.0 on cooperation. Oftentimes, these various ‘webs’ are seen as stages through which the web – and hence its users – develop and progress, but Barassi and Treré (2012) rightfully point out that the practical experience with different web forms is less clear-cut than these categories suggest. Hence it is important to delineate the empirical phenomenon of nature 2.0. Central is the occurrence of *co-creation* (Zwick et al, 2008) or *prosumption* (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) meaning that online information is not simply consumed, but actively modified or co-produced. The above examples all relate to this possibility of enabling conservation supporters to partly co-create the (information about) natures and conservation they want to ‘consume’. But nature 2.0 goes beyond the co-creative element; it also includes sharing, liking and linking these through social media, thus capturing the full spectrum of possibilities for interactive online communication and action.

As many of the features of online life are being employed for conservation ends, it is difficult to capture the breadth of current new online conservation tools and dynamics. Several ‘nature 2.0 categories’ can nonetheless be distinguished. Arguably the most basic of nature 2.0 tools are ecological search engines such as [www.ecosearch.org](http://www.ecosearch.org) and [www.ecosia.org](http://www.ecosia.org). The latter explains that they are an online search engine, like Google or yahoo, but one where “you can help protect the rainforest just by searching the web”,<sup>4</sup> with 80% of the proceeds of advertised links going to rainforest conservation. I will come back to this example below, as

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

it aptly illustrates the complication of the commodification of nature. Another, more interactive category relates to online games that support conservation. My Conservation Park, a Facebook game, for example, helps conservation supporters to ‘build, protect and preserve’.<sup>5</sup> According to the introduction video, “your parks in the game are directly connected to conservation efforts in the real world. As you play, we pay”. In April 2013, WWF South Africa launched a mobile gaming app called ‘rhino raid’. One can play ‘Rad’ the ‘radical rhino’ who chases poachers “across the African savannah in search of the crime syndicate kingpin who is feeding the Asian demand for rhino”. In the process, “The game is also filled with rich information about rhinos and exposes the truth behind the current plague of poaching”.<sup>6</sup> There are many more and sites like <http://ecogamer.org/> and <http://www.gamesfornature.org/> try to educate netizens on the possibilities and ideas behind different conservation games.

Yet another nature 2.0 category relates to online communities dedicated towards environmental and conservation ends. [www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com) is a longstanding platform with over 23,5 million community members, while [www.wiser.com](http://www.wiser.com) calls itself a ‘social network for sustainability and boasts around 78.000 members.’<sup>7</sup> A similar category relates to dedicated web 2.0 platforms aiming to give (potential) supporters new co-creative possibilities to engage in conservation action. One such a platform is [www.pifworld.com](http://www.pifworld.com), a “crowdsourcing platform for a better world” where you can “change the world your way”.<sup>8</sup> One can browse the globe for charities, project and other pifworld ‘players’ and assume different roles, like donating, fundraising, blogging, knowledge sharing, and more. Another platform is 1% club, the “online marketplace that connects people with smart ideas in developing countries with people, money and knowledge around the world”.<sup>9</sup> Like Pifworld, 1% club enables people to donate money, time and knowledge to good causes, including environmental ones.

As with platforms, there has been an explosion of (mobile or web-based) conservation and environmental apps with varying degrees of presumptive possibilities. Many conservation and government agencies develop apps to raise awareness or give information, but others enable conservation supporters to actively contribute to conservation activities, as well as ecological research. For example, citizens can now help conservation biologists track Cane Toads in New South Wales, Australia and through an online ‘Toad Tracker’ and ‘Toad Scan’ locate this invasive species that is endangering indigenous wildlife (Newell et al, 2012). Citizens co-create an online database that helps contain a threat to conservation.<sup>10</sup> Another example is The Nature Conservancy’s ‘Nature Near You’ app, which helps you “interact with the world around you by exploring photos and nature preserves in and around your area. Capture your experience with photography then share on Flickr, Twitter, Facebook or Email”.<sup>11</sup>

These examples are the proverbial ‘tip of the iceberg’ and more will be discussed. Important is that these and other nature 2.0 possibilities are intricately linked to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and others. The websites of most conservation organizations and initiatives sport the familiar buttons that enable viewers to share, like or respond to content. These ‘Social Plugins’, particularly those by Facebook but also by other platforms, are, according to Gerlitz and Helmond (2013: 1354) ‘reworking the fabric of the web’. They argue:

“With the introduction of Social Plugins and the Open Graph, Facebook activities such as liking, commenting and sharing are no longer confined to the platform but are distributed across the web and enable users to connect a wider range of web content to their profiles. Social Plugins may also have a decentralising impact on external websites. Engagement with web content is not confined to designated

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

comment spaces, but takes place across a wide range of platforms and within Facebook across many profiles and News Feeds. In this context, external websites cannot be considered as discrete entities, but function as initialisers for a series of platform-based interactions. The more Social Plugins a website integrates, the more it opens itself up to being shaped by the activities of Facebook users”.

Hence, not only do nearly all conservation organizations these days have Facebook websites, through Social Plugins they allow Facebook to partly determine how people experience their communication. Obviously there are more aspects to this, which I will touch on below. For now, the point that social media platforms are intricately integrated with all types of other web 2.0 possibilities and dynamics - and indeed form or shape these – is important to understand the contemporary political economy of conservation: the production, circulation and consumption of conservation and their social and political effects. As many crucial aspects of conservation like raising funds, awareness and legitimacy, informing, educating, encouraging and receiving feedback from supporters and creating links between actors and sectors are moving online, so the political economy of conservation changes. Some of these seem fairly obvious, such as the reach, speed and fleeting character of information online, the possibilities for linking causes, actors and organizations, and the need for continuous, visually attractive and dynamic content (Eriksen, 2001; Fuchs, 2008). Yet, they sometimes have far-reaching effects that are unforeseen; effects that have been rendered more complicated with the rise of the interactive web 2.0 and subsequent possibilities and demands for co-creation.

Interviews with social media staff of conservation and environmental organizations hint at these.<sup>12</sup> For one, staff of several organizations mentioned that social media and web 2.0 are ‘24/7’ and thus ‘constantly on’. Hence, to stay abreast of discussions and see how information is used, shared, liked and interpreted, they had started ‘weekend-Twitter-shifts’



(my term). Specific staff, mostly from media departments, were responsible for ensuring the organisation's online presence and this meant they had to spend entire weekends online.<sup>13</sup> Another major issue mentioned by several interviewees is that 'conservation consumers' are increasingly restless and demand information and answers immediately. In the case of the South African national conservation parastatal SANParks, staff was struggling with the 'Rhino issue' on social media. As the poaching of Rhinos in South Africa's national parks increased dramatically over the last decade, conservation supporters put increasing pressure on SANParks to communicate information and solutions on and through social media. Several SANParks staff officers mentioned that if they do not respond the same day, or sometimes within two hours, people think they have something to hide and start rumours, which can lead to uncomfortable situations for the organization and its senior staff.<sup>14</sup>

These, of course, are just two potentially far-reaching effects of the Nature 2.0 trend. In what follows I will discuss further examples but more explicitly framed in political economic terms. This is important since just as the internet "is still a medium constructed in a capitalist era" (Papacharissi, 2002: 18; see also Ricker Schulte, 2013), it is clear from a swiftly growing body of literature that the organization, form, imaginations and practice of biodiversity conservation are currently seeing a push to conform to neoliberal governmentalities, politics and practices (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; MacDonald, 2010; Igoe, 2010; Author, 2012a). As Corson argues, conservation is trying ever harder to create "new symbolic and material spaces for global capital expansion" (Corson, 2010: 578). Through schemes and activities such as ecotourism, 'payments for ecosystem services' 'wetland credits', biodiversity derivatives and more, nature conservation is being subjected to capitalist market dynamics and restyled as a tool for the accumulation of capital (Fletcher, 2012; Author, 2012b). This dynamic is neither straightforward nor ever complete, with new media and web 2.0 trends

further complicating the picture. Two key issues in particular, I argue, characterize the way these online trends influence the political economy of conservation, namely how they stimulate *and* complicate the commodification of biodiversity, ecosystems and landscapes and how they help to reimagine ideas, ideals and experiences of (‘pristine’) nature.

### **Stimulating and complicating commodification**

According to Fuchs (2008: 247) the Internet should be analysed from a “dialectical view that sees cyberspace as a contradictory space that is embedded into societal antagonisms and hence is shaped by various conflicting tendencies of development”. One of the antagonisms emphasized by Fuchs is that between competition and cooperation and between commodity and gift economies (p.210; see also Leyshon, 2003). Fuchs argues that both processes of decommodification and commodification are stimulated on the web but that at the same time “although the gift model transcends the commodity model, it is also subsumed under capital” (idem; see also Streeter, 2011: 72). This is because “especially newer strategies of profit generation (social networking platforms, social software, Google, etc) in the internet economy make use of information as a gift in order to achieve a high number of users and to build monopolies in certain fields so that they can charge high advertisement rates” (idem). Another way to explain this is by pointing at direct versus indirect forms of revenue generation (shopping on amazon versus Google advertisements).

These antagonisms also play a role in nature 2.0, for example through the above-mentioned search engine Ecosia ([www.ecosia.org](http://www.ecosia.org)). Ecosia describes itself as “a social business dedicated to environmental sustainability via the donation of revenue to the world’s most effective rainforest protection programs”. They explain as follows:

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

“Our best-known service, the search engine mask at Ecosia.org, is powered by Bing and Yahoo. It lets an essential and routine task – searching the web – double as an ecological contribution: not only are Ecosia search emissions offset, but every click on a sponsored ad within Ecosia translates into either cents for the environment - or cents for generating more cents for the environment. Cents may not sound like much, but they certainly add up. From its inception until December 2010, Ecosia was able to generate just under 125,000 Euros (164,000 USD) for its rainforest protection program with the WWF – and that in just the first year!”<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, income has risen steadily. In June 2012, Ecosia boasted that it had raised 872,380€, and this figure had increased to 1,192,753€ in March 2013, making it a significant political-economic conservation tool. Ecosia is an interesting case of Fuchs’s (2008) antagonism between gift and commodity economies. This is for instance captured in Ecosia’s ‘social business principle’:

“Despite at least 80% of its revenue going to help sustain the world’s rainforests, Ecosia is not an official non-profit organization – it’s a social business. That means Ecosia is run like a normal business, so that it stands to compete with the likes of true for-profit companies in the development and communication of innovative products, services and expertise. Unlike our revenue-driven counterparts, however, our aims are not higher payouts: our goal is to make the largest contribution possible to the protection of the environment via the world’s rainforests. All proceeds generated by Ecosia’s products and services are either redirected to rainforest sustainability programs or reinvested in the business”.<sup>16</sup>

Several types of gifts and commodities are intertwined and become virtually indistinguishable here. As a search engine, Ecosia provides a free gift to consumers by offering them web searches. They pay for this by selling commercial advertising space. In turn, they use 80% of their revenue to provide ‘gifts’ to ‘rainforest sustainability programs’. Concretely, Ecosia has partnered with WWF<sup>17</sup> to support their efforts in protecting the Tumucumaque Mountains National Park in Brazil, as part of the larger Amazon Region Protected Areas (ARPA) program.<sup>18</sup> On its site, Ecosia introduces the park and the efforts to protect it:

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

“The Tumucumaque (too-moo-koo-MAH-key) region in northern Brazil is a special place. Not only does it harbor one of the largest protected areas in the world – it’s also one of the most biologically diverse regions on the planet – making it a widely accepted global priority for conservation and sustainable development. (...) There are some serious problems, though: illegal gold mining, logging, hunting, fishing and unsustainable settlements are emerging as ever-greater threats to this integral biosphere. That’s why the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment established a 38,800-square-kilometre protected area in 2002 with the support of WWF”.

This is a story that appeals to a particular audience (predominantly westerners searching on the net<sup>19</sup>) by espousing familiar ‘visions of the Amazon’ - as globally important Eden and ‘lungs of our planet’.<sup>20</sup> Slater (2002) refers to these visions as ‘gigantifications’, which “are more often exaggerations than outright fabrications”. While Slater is “not denying the physical reality or the importance of the biological diversity of the rainforest”, she is “suggesting that the ability of these particular images to move viewers owes in part to their success in concealing other facets of a much larger reality” (p.15). The much larger (political economic) reality she is interested in relates to the violent and challenging lives of local *garimpeiros* (gold-diggers, p.105) and *remanescentes* (descendants of runaway African slaves, p.159), who are likely the cause of the ‘serious problems’ referred to by Ecosia above. These lives and stories are often left out of the ‘gigantifications’ of the Amazon, also on [ecosia.org](http://ecosia.org).

Hence, not only is the commodification of conservation complicated by the fact that it hides behind a gift economy, it also hides a much larger reality behind a (seemingly) simply task of searching the web. Yet this example is limited in that the co-creative element is restricted to entering a search-term and clicking on results. Nature 2.0 media, platforms and activities offer far more complex and far-reaching possibilities and complications, amongst others by

being deeply implicated in what Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) refer to as the ‘like-economy’. As noted above, the like-economy is part of a broader process of ‘socialising the web’, particularly by Facebook, but also by other social media platforms, which is not neutral: “Facebook uses a rhetoric of sociality and connectivity to create an infrastructure in which social interactivity and user affects are instantly turned into valuable consumer data and enter multiple cycles of multiplication and exchange” (idem: 1349). Similarly, nature 2.0 is deeply ‘social’ as in the context of the like-economy, and many platforms have sprung up connecting user affects to the political economy of conservation. One example is [www.greenvolved.com](http://www.greenvolved.com) that uses similar connectivity tactics to turn consumer data - in this case the amount of ‘clicks’ or ‘votes’ for environmental projects – into corporate sponsorship. In their words: “when you click on green projects you believe in, your voice reaches powerful corporations looking for green projects to sponsor. When a project wins enough votes, it gets funded and becomes a reality”. In this way, nature is indirectly commodified through corporate social responsibility, the problematic aspects of which disappear behind the idea that “with one click, you can save an endangered species, clean up the ocean, or support the invention of a new green energy source”.<sup>21</sup>

This commodified socializing of the web is further connected to a “proliferating array of arrangements promising to connect conservation and consumption” (Igoe, 2013: 17). As Igoe (2010: 384) argues, once certain “elisions are achieved, the spectacular productions of transnational conservation are free to propose relationships and connections that are simple and direct”, for example “through the consumption of new commodities, which simultaneously promise opportunities for individual self-expression”. Igoe gives the example of Conservation International’s ‘Protect an Acre’ website, which “features an interactive rainforest divided into discrete acres; some bear the name of their adopters and some are

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

marked as available” (idem). Another example is the above-mentioned Pifworld website ([www.pifworld.com](http://www.pifworld.com)), where conservation consumers can help ‘build a wildlife park’. The website encourages its online ‘players’ as follows:

“Let’s build the largest wildlife park in the world starting with the Elephant Corridor to give room to 100,000 Elephants. So far, the project is crowd-funded by more than 500 supporters, 33 teams and 20 companies from all over the world. This is huge! What makes The Elephant Corridor so special? It is a unique and innovative project that enables the elephants in Botswana to roam freely across the border to Zambia. This project is the first and key step in the realisation of world’s biggest wildlife park covering an area of 300,000 km<sup>2</sup>”.<sup>22</sup>

Individual players can take on different roles – fundraiser, donator, blogger, expert, reporter or leader – that enable ‘you’ to ‘change the world your way’, in this case by building a wildlife park.<sup>23</sup> In another paper (Author, 2013) I have explained why this project is based on flawed assumptions about the feasibility of the elephant corridor. Here I want to recapitulate the larger argument of that paper in relation to Pifworld’s (and other organizations) emphasis on the customized ‘you’ since it further illustrates how nature 2.0 stimulates *and* complicates the commodification of nature. The background to this argument is what Goldman and Papson (2011) refer to as the intensification of the political economy of the sign and subsequent decomposition of sign value. As signs are ubiquitous in the (online) mediatized world, there is a problem of how to make signs valuable, how to get people to respond to particular signs and take appropriate action. In the context of Nature 2.0, this could be an advertisement by WWF on Facebook with the appeal to help save tigers. The value in the advertisement (the sign) is only realized once certain actions have been undertaken: a click on the advertisement, reading information on the WWF website, and a donation to its tiger programme.

But of course WWF is not the only conservation organisation – there are many that compete for attention of (potential) online conservation supporters. The result is described by Goldman and Papson (2011: 38) who argue that “the greater the velocity of sign values, the greater the tendencies towards clutter and the likelihood of entropy in the value realization process”. In turn, this problem of the ‘decomposition of value’ has forced producers of sign value “to customize products for even the smallest of niche markets – You” (idem). Hence, the focus on the generic ‘you’ makes sense in a highly marketized environment where ‘social connections’ and ‘doing good’ in the like-economy consist solely of individual actions by hordes of ‘you’s’.

In the case of the Pifworld elephant corridor, the goal is to raise 430.000€, 94% of which was attained in November 2013. Again, a significant political economy of conservation is at play here, but works through complicated individualized forms of consumption whereby the ‘gigantifications’ of online players ill relate to the relationships and larger realities on-the-ground in Botswana and Zambia. The latter became clear during research in Botswana in July 2013 and March 2014 which showed that rather than elephants moving to Zambia as the corridor promises, they are moving away from Zambia to the relative safety of Botswana where poaching pressures are considerably less. Several interviewees stressed that due to poaching pressures, and complicated local tenure and power dynamics, an elephant corridor such as the one proposed online will be difficult for the foreseeable future.<sup>24</sup> But while this complicates the commodification of nature in Botswana and Zambia (as it might – positively or negatively - impact on tourism), it hardly complicates the consumption of the idea of the elephant corridor on [www.pifworld.com](http://www.pifworld.com), which continued unabated.

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

This, in turn, was little appreciated by some conservation actors in Botswana. In interviews in January and July 2013, government and NGO actors questioned why Dutch online conservation supporters raised funds for a corridor they had no knowledge about.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, they made clear they could not participate in this new political economy of conservation as they lacked time or, in the case of government actors, a clear mandate. All in all, a political economy of conservation is at play here with familiar and new elements that deserve further critical engagement, particularly how it stimulates and complicates the commodification of nature. In doing so, it is important to also be aware of how nature 2.0 could lead to the opposite: possibilities for decommodification and critical awareness of the commodification of nature. One example is culture jamming through games on <http://www.molleindustria.org/>. The website describes itself as:

“a project about games and ideology, it’s a bit of art, media activism, research, and agitp[r]op. The idea is to apply the culture jamming/tactical media (remember tactical media?) treatment to videogames: spreading radical memes and, in the process, challenging the language of power, the infrastructures, the modes, genres and tropes of the dominant discourse which was omnipresent in videogame culture.”

These counter-examples, however, are few and far between, and rarely if ever found on the web 2.0 and social media spaces of the large conservation organizations that attract the majority of global conservation funding. Most conservation actors employing new media tools either openly espouse their neoliberal vision for conservation (such as Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy) while others do not explicate their precise involvement in the commodification of nature. Instead, most of them emphasize the possibilities that these new online tools offer in terms of the reimagining of nature online.



### **Reimagining nature online**

According to Igoe (2010: 377) conservation activists are increasingly encouraged to engage in their own online ‘world-making’ projects, which “combine to powerful effect in the spectacular productions of biodiversity conservation”. Igoe reappropriates Debord’s concept of the spectacle, now defined as the mediation of relations between humans and nature through images. ‘Spectacular productions’, from this viewpoint, relate to how conservation activists are now enabled and increasingly encouraged to reimagine nature according to their own ideas and visions of what conserved nature *should* be. In their online travails, conservation activists leave pictures, messages, blogs, tweets, websites and other images that help mediate their relation to the natural world. Together they add up to a complex picture of nature that combines – amongst others - the imagination and priorities of individual online activists, the interests of facilitating conservation organizations and broader historical, political economic and cultural forces and dynamics. In more abstract terms, new online media transform the production and consumption of ideas and ideals of ‘pristine nature’ and thus how humans and nature (should) relate.

Nature 2.0, from this point of view, is nature ‘tailored to your interests’: *your* or *my* nature. The Nature Conservancy has a website called [my.nature.org](http://my.nature.org) where “You’ll get green living tips, nature images, invitations and conservation news tailored to your interests!”.<sup>26</sup> Arguably another antagonism is created here, that between *social* media and *individual* imagination. It is another form of Slater’s ‘gigantification’: a focus on the animal ‘you’ love, whereby ‘you’ can completely dedicate your site or ‘tailor the information you want to receive to what nature you like’. This has of course always happened to some extent, particularly through the focus on so-called ‘charismatic megafauna’ (see, f.i. Leader-Williams and Dublin, 2000) but is now taken to a new level.

One way of explaining this ‘new level’ of the generic ‘you’ is through Streeter’s (2011: 62) discussion of the history of the term ‘personal’ computer. He argues that it is odd that computers were designated ‘personal’, arguing that it

“entered the vocabulary of computing because it is the opposite of *impersonal*. Before the mid-1970s, both the computer industry and the culture at large generally saw computers as the embodiment of the neutral, the universal, the rational and mathematical – as impersonal tools for centralizing bureaucracies, Taylorizing the office, or winning nuclear wars (...). Like the slogan ‘black is beautiful’ in the 1960s, ‘personal computer’ was a deliberate combination of two things the dominant culture understood as opposites. At the beginning, attaching the term *personal* to something associated with impersonal universality provided a nicely startling juxtaposition, a two-word condensation of a larger cultural refiguration of the meaning of computing as a whole”.

He even argues that “it announced a radical reclassification of computers, taking them out of the old box of mathematical impersonality and putting them in a new one that associated them precisely with individual uniqueness, distinctiveness, unpredictability, and expression – with all those things we have long associated with the romantic persona” (idem).

Streeter relates the same argument to the Internet and, I argue, it can be extended to nature 2.0. In online conservation, the dualism between romanticism and mathematical impersonality also plays an important role in that nature has long and is still often described in romantic terms – beauty, purity, serene, wild, etc. – whereas its commodification is a distinctly unromantic dynamic, dependent on ‘mathematical impersonality’ and the metrics of the ‘like-economy’, amongst others. As Robertson (2006) argues, the ‘nature that capital can see’ is an impersonal nature, subjected to rational, quantitative calculation, and sliced into small bits that can be trademarked and sold (cf. author, 2012a). The tables, then, have seemingly turned: instead of the more traditional conservation narrative where rational

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

commodified machines form a danger to romanticized natures we increasingly see romantic computing and online imagination employed to save commodified and rationalized natures.

The workings of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) – the world’s largest conservation NGO – exemplify this. Amongst the most aggressively neoliberal conservation NGOs<sup>27</sup>, they have turned to web 2.0 and social media in a major way. Besides the above-mentioned my.nature.org website, one can join their trademarked ‘all hands on earth’ initiative where you can earn online ‘points and badges’ by doing ‘bite-sized’ conservation duties and sharing evidence online and with friends. Being competitive in getting ‘points and badges’ becomes a romantic thing with TNC as is clear from how they enthrall (potential) supporters:

“When you have an idea share it (you even get points when you comment on our pages). Maybe you’ll inspire another member of the community. Or maybe we’ll steal it and promote it on our website, giving you full credit of course. Thanks for helping us get All Hands on Earth. Now go have some fun saving the planet!”

Other initiatives, amongst others through Facebook, twitter and other social media are continuously developed, many of which try to convey a similar feel by allowing consumers to reimagine nature online.

But, importantly, organisations actively facilitate the reimagining of nature online, often by playing into dominant cultural tropes. In March 2013, for example, TNC organized ‘Nature’s Madness’, an online competition akin to US college basketball, where a random selection of animals and even a hurricane were pitted against each other (see figure 1). The idea seemed to be to relate to a target-group’s interest and lifeworld (young, competitive, sporty, etc.) and while doing so insert an educational element:

“Are you a super-fan of nature? In honor of college basketball’s biggest moment, we’ve pitted together nature’s fiercest creatures for our own online competition this March. Get to know our “Sweet 16” teams

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

below. They'll face off on our Nature Conservancy Facebook pages on select tournament dates (March 28, April 2, April 5, April 7-8). Our Facebook fans will decide on which teams advance to the Elite 8, Final Four and championship game. In real life, these critters are facing their toughest rival yet: habitat loss. We're committed to helping nature win".<sup>28</sup>

*[figure 1 about here]*

The animals obviously do not actually fight; the affects of conservation supporters that happen to be online and interested in playing decide the winner, and ultimately, 'nature's champion'. In turn, this reimagining of nature as a competitive championship serves to make the point that TNC is 'committed to helping nature win'. The question is: win against what? This is not explicated; the idea is that when we all work together through TNCs 'conservation by design' approach, we will enable "governments, companies, and communities to use and share space, protect natural areas, improve resource management, and invest more wisely for a sustainable future".<sup>29</sup>

This paper is not the place to develop a major critique of TNCs 'conservation by design' and its neoliberal vision, or that of other large conservation NGOs (see MacDonald, 2010; Brockington and Duffy, 2010). Rather, the point is to give a hint of the dynamic ways in which nature is reimagined online through new co-creative technologies and social media and how this relates to the stimulation and complication of the commodification of nature under contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

*[figure 2 around here]*

*PLEASE do not quote or share without permission*

New media, however, do not only stimulate the reimagining of nature online. They also enable people to reimagine and differently experience offline conservation landscapes, particularly through mobile Internet applications (cf. De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2011). According to Farman (2012: 43, 53), landscapes have become ‘information interfaces’ whereby ‘mobile interface can become a collaborative space’ and users “work together to create mobile representations that inform the lived space they traverse”. So, for example, with the Kruger Sightings app or Twitter alerts (see figure 2), one can now experience South Africa’s Kruger National Park very differently. Instead of roaming the park searching for chance encounters, one can now chase sightings reported by other visitors and so ‘reimagine’ your Kruger experience.<sup>30</sup> In this way, “our embodied relationship to these interfaces uniquely structures our experience (and thus conception) of the world around us” (Farnam, 2013: 46), while at the same time changing material dynamics in conservation areas.

### ***Concluding discussion: implications and building blocks***

In this paper I have argued that two dominant issues structure the context in which nature conservation and new media confront, change and influence each other, namely the stimulation and complication of the commodification of nature and the reimagining of nature online. But these issues are only the start of debates on and investigations into nature 2.0. In particular, I argue that the specificity of nature conservation and the importance attributed to the materiality of species and habitats can uniquely contribute to new media studies more generally. In this concluding section, I use the Nature 2.0 lens to speak to important discussions in new media studies. This is intended as strictly indicative, in order to provide building blocks and ideas for further research on nature 2.0 and the effects of new media on human-nature dynamics more broadly.

Two issues that I believe could provide interesting building blocks are materiality and distinction. These are related and emanate from a popular trope in new media studies, namely that ‘meaningful distinctions’ between “lived and mediated reality are fading” (Deuze, 2007: xii). Arvidsson (2006: 13) argues that the “complete integration of Media Culture and everyday life means that it no longer makes much sense to maintain a distinction between the two” while Farman (2012: 6) states that “eventually, the collaboration between virtual space and what might be called ‘actual’ space becomes so intertwined that it is no longer useful to think of them as distinct categories”. Other scholars come to similar arguments but from a Foucauldian perspective (Fisher, 2010: 39) or from the perspective of locative technologies (De Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2011), though these arguments have important nuances I cannot get into here.

My argument builds on Kim’s (2013: 9) point that in many new media studies there has been an “endemic exclusion of a concept of the material external to the perceiving subject. The material has been conceived of as the supplement to the virtual with the material perceptible in its disappearance”.<sup>31</sup> And while the above quotes do not mention the material, I argue that the arguments implied in them corroborate Kim’s point, and the key to this is in the term ‘distinction’. If, as Deuze holds, there is no ‘meaningful distinction between lived and mediated reality’, then necessarily all of lived reality – including its material foundations – cannot be thought off as outside of mediation. This becomes (especially) problematic when one talks about the issue of nature *conservation*. After all, those employing web 2.0 and social media tools for conserving nature are not interested in conserving virtual species or habitats but material species and habitats *outside and independent of their mediation* (see Lindahl Elliot, 2006)

This is not to say that mediation and material conservation are not intertwined – indeed the opposite, as the ‘nature 2.0’ concept as defined above testifies. Rather, I argue that in this intertwined dynamic meaningful and useful distinctions can and should still be made. Here I take my cue from Hannah Arendt (1998) that distinctions are important and that in the case of dichotomies between virtual and the real and especially the virtual and the material, the contextual specificities of topics needs to be accounted for. Indeed, in Markell’s (2011: 36-37) interpretation of Arendt, it is precisely the tension between distinguishing spaces or dynamics so that they (can) provide for certain functions or objectives and not letting them become isolated, self-referential “and thus politically impotent” that is the ontological crux in locating meaning in distinctions. And, importantly, being sensitive to meaningful distinctions is then not the same as saying there is an ontologically preferential space where meaning (-making) happens in (relation to) new media. As Harvey (1996: 322) notes: “materiality, representation, and imagination are not separate worlds. There can be no particular privileging of any one realm over the other, even if it is only in the social practices of daily life that the ultimate significance of all forms of activity is registered”.

Several potential implications for new media studies and further investigations arise: how to conceptualize and distinguish the virtual and the real or material in such a way as to do justice to the realities of online worlds, offline worlds and their dynamic interactions? And how should we further conceptualise, theorize and empirically investigate the distinctions between them? How does the question of nature and its conservation fit into this, especially in the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism with its focus on commodifying nature as a solution to environmental crises? For one, we need to go beyond Kim’s (2013: 9-10) definition of a ‘substantive understanding of the material’ understood as “the presence of objects, structures, and others that comprise one’s immediate surroundings” whereby

“immediate is meant here in the sense of physical proximity”. While Kim points at a ‘meaningful distinction’, I believe - based on the above discussions - that we should broaden the idea of material outside of physical proximity and include ideas of material in relation to other’s physical proximity, as conservation nature through new media in the West can have direct, material consequences for the ‘immediate surroundings’ of those far away (think of the increased presence of dangerous animals for those living around parks, for example). Reinterpreting materiality and distinction in this way provides building blocks for rethinking important arguments in new media studies, as well as enabling further investigations into the links between new media, conservation and human-nature relations.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://my.nature.org/nature/>. Last viewed: 7 November 2013.

<sup>2</sup> <https://secure2.convio.net/cintl/site/SPageNavigator/Connect4Conservation.html>. Last viewed: 25 May 2012.

<sup>3</sup> [http://wwf.panda.org/how\\_you\\_can\\_help/campaign/](http://wwf.panda.org/how_you_can_help/campaign/). Last viewed: 25 May 2012.

<sup>4</sup> [www.ecosia.org](http://www.ecosia.org), last viewed: 27 March 2013.

<sup>5</sup> [http://apps.facebook.com/myconservationpark/?fb\\_source=search&ref=ts&fref=ts](http://apps.facebook.com/myconservationpark/?fb_source=search&ref=ts&fref=ts). last viewed: 27 March 2013.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.wwf.org.za/act\\_now/rhino\\_raid/](http://www.wwf.org.za/act_now/rhino_raid/). Last viewed: 30 October 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Figures from around end October 2013.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pifworld.com/aboutpifworld/individuals>. Last viewed: 27 March 2013.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.1procentclub.nl/>. Last viewed: 27 March 2013.

<sup>10</sup> The website is <http://wildbynature.com.au/toadtracker.html>. For a broader discussion of citizen science in the context of web 2.0, see Goodchild, 2007.

<sup>11</sup>

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.treeline.tnc&feature=search\\_result#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLD&EsImNvbS50cmVlbGluZS50bmMiXQ](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.treeline.tnc&feature=search_result#?t=W251bGwsMSwxLD&EsImNvbS50cmVlbGluZS50bmMiXQ). Last viewed: 28 October 2013.

<sup>12</sup> The ongoing research project on which this paper is based started in February 2012. Since then, over 50 interviews were conducted in The Netherlands, USA and South Africa with staff of major conservation and environmental organisations and online conservation supporters.

<sup>13</sup> Amongst others, interview Greenpeace employee, Amsterdam, 16 July 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Interview SANParks staff, Pretoria, 11 February 2013.

<sup>15</sup> <http://ecosia.org/about.php>. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

<sup>16</sup> <http://ecosia.org/values.php>. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.



---

<sup>17</sup> WWF, on their website, explain the project as follows: “Ecosia donates 80% of the revenue generate from "paid searches" to WWF's Tumucumaque project in the Amazon. Ecosia also compensates all the carbon associated with each search made. For a quick and easy way to help the planet, Ecosia offers everyone with an internet connection the chance to help their one and only planet!?”. [http://wwf.panda.org/how\\_you\\_can\\_help/campaign/ecosia\\_search/](http://wwf.panda.org/how_you_can_help/campaign/ecosia_search/). Last viewed: 18 June 2012. More recently (October 2013), it became clear that Ecosia switched to work with The Nature Conservancy.

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.worldwildlife.org/what/wherewework/amazon/WWFBinaryitem5243.pdf>. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ecosia’s website shows the ‘distribution of searches per country’: 93.74% originates in western Europe or the USA (with Germany alone taking up 59.68%), making it safe to say that their audience is ‘western’. See: <http://ecosia.org/statistics.php>. Last viewed: 28 March 2013.

<sup>20</sup> <http://ecosia.org/rainforest.php>. Last viewed: 18 June 2012.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.greenolved.com/how-it-works>. Last viewed: 30 October 2013.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.pifworld.com/projects/TheElephantCorridor/61>. Last viewed: 29 March 2013.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.pifworld.com/aboutpifworld/individuals>. Last viewed: 29 March 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with NGO staff, government officials and tourism agency staff, 20-25 July 2013, Kasane, Botswana.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with NGO staff and government officials, 21-22 January 2013, Gaborone and 20-25 July 2013, Kasane, Botswana.

<sup>26</sup> <http://my.nature.org/nature/>. Last viewed: 29 March 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Exemplified amongst others through their highly technocratic, ‘science-based’ ‘conservation by design’ framework, their business and corporation-friendly approach to conservation (Tercek, 2013), and with leadership straight from Wall Street (Mark Tercek, the CEO, is a former managing director and Partner for Goldman Sachs, while the chief operating officer Brian McPeck, was “with McKinsey & Company”, see: <http://www.nature.org/about-us/governance/executive-team/index.htm>).

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/natures-march-madness.xml>. Last viewed: 28 October 2013.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/urgentissues/smart-development/index.htm>. Last viewed: 28 October 2013.

<sup>30</sup> See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/31/tech/web/kruger-latest-sightings-nadav-ossendryver> and <http://www.justmeans.com/Social-Innovation-Wildlife-Website-Created-by-16-Year-Old-Boy-That-Attracts-Google/55348.html>. Last viewed: 9 November 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Kim emphasizes that this is also the case for literature on embodiment in relation to new media.

## References

Arendt H (1998[1958]) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arora P (2012) Typology of Web 2.0 spheres: Understanding the Cultural Dimension of Social Media Spaces. *Current Sociology* 60(5): 599-618.

Arvidsson A (2006) *Brands. Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. London: Routledge.

Barassi V and Treré E (2012) Does Web 3.0 come after Web 2.0? Deconstructing theoretical assumptions through practice. *New Media & Society* 14(8): 1269-1285.

Biersack A (2006) Reimagining Political Ecology: Culture/Power/History/Nature. In: Biersack A and Greenberg JB (eds) *Reimagining Political Ecology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 3-42.

Blewitt J (2010) *Media, Ecology and Conservation. Using the Media to Protect the World's Wildlife and Ecosystems*. Dartington: Green Books.

Brockington D and Duffy R (2010) Capitalism and Conservation. The Production and Reproduction of Biodiversity Conservation. *Antipode* 42(3): 469-484.

Corson, C. (2010). Shifting Environmental Governance in a Neoliberal World: USAID for Conservation. *Antipode* 42, 3: 576-602.

Couldry N (2012). *Media, Society, World. Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

De Souza e Silva A and Sutko D (2011) Theorizing Locative Technologies through Philosophies of the Virtual. *Communication Theory* 21: 23-42.

Eriksen TH (2001) *Tyranny of the Moment. Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press.

Farman J (2012) *Mobile Interface Theory. Embodied Space and Locative Media*. London: Routledge.

Fenton N and Barassi V (2011) Alternative Media and Social Networking Sites: The Politics of Individuation and Political Participation. *The Communication Review* 14(3): 179-196

Fletcher R (2012) Using the Master's Tools? Neoliberal Conservation and the Evasion of Inequality. *Development and Change* 43(1): 295-317

Fisher E (2010) *Media and New Capitalism in the Digital Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fuchs C (2008) *Internet and Society. Social Theory in the Information Age*. New York: Routledge.

Gerlitz C and Helmond A (2013) The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web. *New Media and Society* 15(8): 1348-1365.

Gillespie T (2010) The Politics of 'Platforms'. *New Media and Society* 12(3): 347-364.

Goodchild M (2007) Citizens as Sensors: the World of Volunteer Geography. *GeoJournal* 69(4): 211-221.

Hillis K (1999) *Digital Sensations. Space, Identity, and Embodiment in Virtual Reality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Igoe J (2010) The Spectacle of Nature in the Global Economy of Appearances: Anthropological engagements with the Images of Transnational Conservation. *Critique of Anthropology* 30: 375-397.

Igoe J (2013) Consume, Connect, Conserve: Consumer Spectacle and the Technical Mediation of Neoliberal Conservation's Aesthetic of Redemption and Repair. *Human Geography* 6(1): 16-28.

Karpf D (2010) Online Political Mobilization from the Advocacy Group's Perspective: Looking Beyond Clicktivism. *Policy & Internet* 2(4): article 2. Available at: <http://www.psocommons.org/policyandinternet/vol2/iss4/art2>.

Kim J (2013) Whither the Material in New Media Studies?. *Communication +1* 2: Article 6. Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo/vol2/iss1/6>.

Leader-Williams N and Dublin HT (2000) Charismatic megafauna as 'flagship species'. In: Entwistle A and Dunstone N (eds) *Priorities for the Conservation of Mammalian Species. Has the Panda had its Day?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 53-84.

Levitt JN (2002) *Conservation in the Internet Age*. Washington: Island Press.

Leyshon A (2003) Scary monsters? Software formats, peer-to-peer networks, and the spectre of the gift. *Society and Space* 21(5): 533-558.

Lindahl Elliot N (2006) *Mediating Nature*. London: Routledge.

Luke TW (2001) Reconstructing Nature: How the New Informatics are Rewriting the Environment and Society as Bitspace. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 12(3): 3-27.

MacDonald KI (2010) Business, Biodiversity and New 'Fields' of Conservation: The World Conservation Congress and the Renegotiation of Organisational Order. *Conservation and Society* 8(4): 256-275.

Markell P (2011) Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of The Human Condition. *College Literature* 38, 15-44.

Newell D, Pembroke M and Boyd W (2012) Crowd Sourcing for Conservation: Web 2.0 a powerful Tool for Biologists. *Future Internet* 4(2): 551-562.

Nunes M (2006) *Cyberspaces of Everyday Life*. London: University of Minnesota Press.

Papacharissi Z (2002) The Virtual Sphere: the Internet as a Public Sphere. *New Media & Society* 4(1): 9-27.

Ricker Schulte S (2013) *Cached. Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Ritzer G and Jurgenson N (2010) Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital 'Prosumer'. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10(3): 13-36.

Robertson MM (2006) The nature that capital can see: Science, state, and market in the commodification of ecosystem services. *Society and Space* 24(3): 367–387.

Slater C (2002) *Entangled Edens. Visions of the Amazon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Streeter T (2011) *The Net Effect. Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet*. New York: New York University Press.

Tercek M (2013) *Nature's Fortune: How Business and Society Thrive by Investing in Nature*. New York: Basic Books.

Weeks P (1999) Cyber-activism: World Wildlife Fund's Campaign to Save the Tiger. *Culture & Agriculture* 21(3): 19-30.

Zwick D Bonsu SK and Darmody A (2008) Putting Consumers to Work. Co-Creation and new Marketing Govern-mentality. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 163-196.

# NATURE'S MADNESS 2013

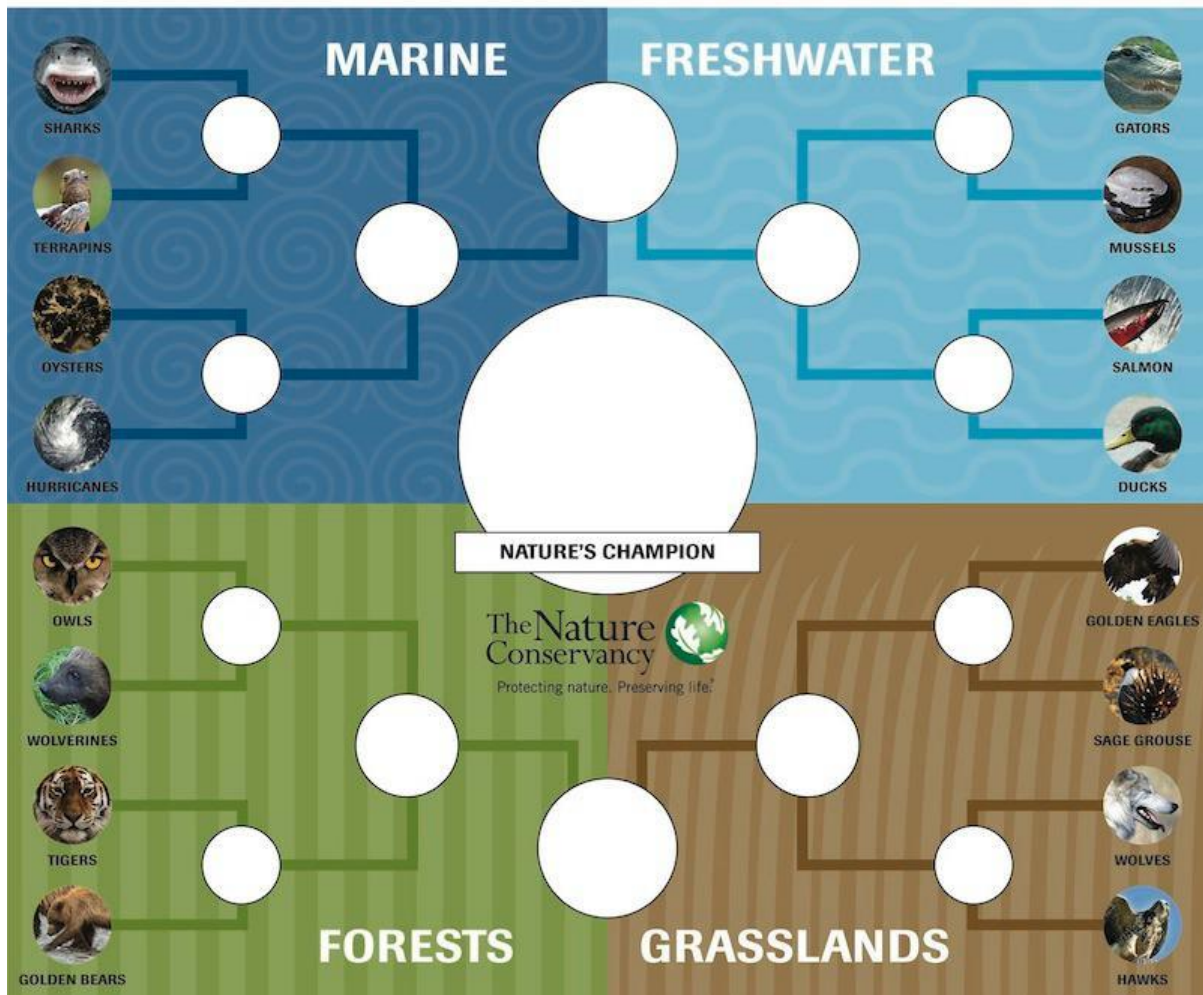


Figure 1: TNC's Nature's Madness 2013. Source: <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151491721426740&set=a.189919806739.127298.8057376739&type=1&theater>. Last viewed: 28 March 2013.



Figure 2: twitter Kruger Sightings screen shot (22 March 2013).