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The values of nature: personal narratives of conservation in South Africa

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Abstract:

This dissertation explores the values of nature through the personal narratives of landowners in the Overberg area of Western Cape, South Africa. In the past, scholarly literature has imagined nature as separated from the human world. Historically, mainstream conservation methods have followed ideals of nature in forming environmental management policies and practices, aiming to create and maintain an isolated nature. This ideal of nature has largely ignored the roles of humans within the environment. A range of new fields of studies around identity, business and politics explore new ways of imagining nature, focusing on the human within nature and the nature within the human. Using these alternative imaginings, this research uncovers a variety of ways 'humanness' and nature are deeply embedded within each other. This research challenges the ideal of a pristine otherness whilst both supporting and filling in the gaps of contemporary alternative literature. The personal narratives of 34 landowners were gathered during 10 weeks of fieldwork. These stories offered an alternative portrayal of the relationship between humans, nature and conservation. Landownership was more than business as usual; land embodied deep and meaningful emotions, experiences and discourses of daily human life. Landscapes embodied personal emotions of owners through shaping their identities, spirituality, belonging and family histories. Dynamics of politics manifested in different forms such as fear, mistrust, corruption and exclusion throughout landowner's experiences and attitudes. These political factors, emotions and economic dynamics play a role in shaping landowners' attitudes, resistances and participation both towards conservation as well as nature, in turn influencing the way they organise themselves in relation to conservation bodies such as government run programmes as well as NGOs. It also affects how they organise, negotiate and manage themselves and their land. Conservation management of land should take into account these deeply complex, multidimensional and integrated complexities entrenched within daily narratives of landownership.

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