



# Conserved Spaces, Ancestral Places

## Conservation, History and Identity among Farm Labourers in the Sundays River Valley, South Africa

Teresa Connor

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*Reviewed by Wendy Annecké (Cape Research Centre, South African National Parks)*

**T**eresa Connor's commendable examination of land rights and identities forged in relation to the Sundays River Valley shows how changes in land use and ownership have resulted in deep scars on individuals, families and the land in what is now the Addo Elephant National Park.

*Conserved Spaces, Ancestral Places* addresses four themes: the political ecology of conservation and protected areas; the agrarian history of South Africa and the Eastern Cape; the geography and anthropology of space, place and identity; and applied anthropology and population displacement. Connor asks searching questions about whether local residents have benefitted from "co-management" models that include their continued displacement and exclusion from reserves, arguing that they have been obliterated from the history, memory and representation of conserved landscapes. Through the application of ethnographic principles to a series of interviews and careful scrutiny of documents (some of which were retrieved, dishevelled, from an abandoned house), Connor develops nuanced pictures of the families who have lived longest in the area.

An interesting aspect of fluidity in this "hybrid space" is the co-existence from the mid-1700s and early 1800s of Khoikhoi, Gqunukwebe (Xhosa) and trekboers of Dutch, French and German descent. Known then as the Zuurveld, the region was largely peaceful and

fruitful, a place of "assimilation, where occupants lived with a certain degree of tolerance and inclusion" across various tracts of land.

This agrarian lifestyle, characterised by codependence on each other and the land, deteriorated with the breakup of the land into farms, the fencing of those farms, the diverse simultaneous uses of and claims to the land, and the development of categories of race and class. These complex relations produced a particular kind of subservience imbued with mutual dependence and marked by exploitation and violence. Such relations continued up to 1970 (indeed may still), when forced removals brutally divorced old families from their land and homes. Connor argues that the extraordinary pain and confusion of this time, too recent to be forgotten, has been inadequately acknowledged and addressed.

Connors is particularly critical of the politics of conservation, the World Bank's neo-liberal influence and SANParks' expansion of the Addo Elephant National Park. Connors shows how broken promises and brutality from whites left farmworkers behind in unfamiliar and poverty-stricken townships while the authorities used consultants and their reports to justify the neglect. The forced removals that had occurred particularly between 1970 and 1994 continued with the expansion of the park. How ludicrous it seems to remove poor people with a small footprint from their ancestral land to make way for rich people with

a significant footprint and call this "conservation", especially since these wealthy tourists require new concrete buildings, use significant resources including energy and water, and produce excessive waste in return.

Three intriguing chapters are concerned with the old families remaining in the area, including Nellie Lambani, Alec Nombula, and the April, Biggs, Scritch and Landman families. Connors is careful to show both continuity and rupture between individuals and the land, but the link between these families and the park management could have been better shown. For example, it would have been interesting to hear the experiences of those who got jobs in the park as rangers, and I would have liked to hear more about what SANParks should do to address the wounds of removals in Kabouga, Enon and Colchester. Far from separating people from the land, forced removals appear to generate nostalgia and a longing for the past that could be crippling.

Fans of *Jock of the Bushveld* might be interested to know that Sir Percy Fitzpatrick owned extensive land on the Sundays River. Through his and others' connections with the government, Fitzpatrick and company were granted permission to build Lake Menz (now Darlington Dam) and the irrigation scheme that led to the farms around Kirkwood and Addo producing over 40 percent of South African citrus exports. North of the Zuurberg, the land is now desolate and abandoned. NA