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# Interactive elephants: Nature, tourism and neoliberalism

Rosaleen Duffy\*

Department of Politics, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

This paper traces the relationships between neoliberalism, tourism and nature. It argues that the dynamics of global tourism reveal an underlying (neoliberal) world order that draws specific places and animals into the world economy. In order to explore these debates further, this paper uses the recent development of interactive tourist experiences with trained elephants in Botswana, Southern Africa. This paper focuses on how those experiences are produced. In so doing, it tackles how nature is entrained, reconfigured and recreated to produce tourist experiences; it highlights how nature, tourism and neoliberalism are linked and with what effects, especially for the elephants themselves. This is an important but under-researched area in tourism studies.

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### Introduction

This paper traces the dynamics between tourism, nature and neoliberalism and it does so via an examination of elephant back tourism in Southern Africa. I argue that the dynamics of global tourism reveal an underlying (neoliberal) world order which draws animals and places into the world economy in particular ways. The recent developments in safari tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa reveal the interactions between neoliberalism, tourism and nature. Nature has been targeted, commodified and opened up, via global tourism, to the logics of neoliberalism. This has produced new dynamics and challenges, it is clear that the effects are complex and uneven, and they are not entirely negative for people who work with elephants, or for the elephants themselves. As Castree argues the neoliberalisation of nature is, by definition, a socioecological project and its effects are at once societal and biophysical. However the effects are judged, the outcomes are not trivial, at certain scales, specific social actors and/or the biophysical world enjoy or suffer the consequences, and the consequences are far from subtle (Castree 2008a, p. 166).

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Development Studies, SOAS, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)20 7637 2388.

E-mail address: [rd38@soas.ac.uk](mailto:rd38@soas.ac.uk)

While there is a lively and vibrant debate on how tourism might contribute to economic development in the South (for example see [Sharpley and Telfer \(eds.\), 2002](#)), there has been surprisingly little attention to the specific inter-relationships between tourism and neoliberalism. There have been some recent critical studies by [Fletcher \(2011\)](#), [West and Carrier \(2004\)](#), [Schilcher \(2007\)](#), [Lacher and Nepal \(2010\)](#) and [Neves \(2010\)](#) who do explore the entanglements between the industry and the wider global system, and by [Ayikoru, Tribe, and Airey \(2009\)](#) who analyse the neoliberal ideological underpinnings of tourism education in the UK (also see [Hall, 2010](#)). Similarly, the debate on neoliberalising nature is on-going in geography, but is not a central concern for tourism studies (see [Bakker, 2010](#); [Bakker, 2005](#); [Castree, 2009, 2008a, 2008b, 2003](#); [Heynen et al., 2007](#); [Mansfield, 2004](#); [McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, pp. 275–277](#); [Peck & Theodore, 2007](#)). The purpose of this paper is to draw these themes together to refine our understanding of the inter-linkages between tourism, neoliberalism and nature.

In order to develop these debates, this paper examines the recent rise in interactive experiences with trained elephants in Southern Africa, especially Botswana. Tourist interactions with trained elephants are marketed as 'back to nature' experiences and as a way of getting closer to wildlife. This new twist in the safari industry sheds light on the ways that nature is reconfigured, shaped and commodified by tourism as a driver of neoliberalism. Firstly, I outline the profile of tourism in Botswana; secondly, I explain the relationship between tourism and neoliberalism; thirdly I examine the development of interactive elephants in Southern Africa, especially in Botswana.

### **Interactive elephants: tourism in Botswana**

In this paper, I argue that the growth of the global tourism industry in the last twenty years needs to be placed in the wider context of neoliberalism. Tourism is one of a number of global dynamics that allows neoliberalism to travel over time and space; in essence tourism seems to offer a pathway through the contradiction between the drive for continual growth and finite natural resources ([Fletcher, 2011](#); [O'Connor, 1988](#)).

However, the idea that everything is connected in ecosystems presents a problem for neoliberalism; in order to bring conservation into the orbit of capitalism, we need to expose and categorise the various ecosystemic threads and linkages so that they can be subjected to further separation, marketization, and alienation. This process of separation allows nature to be 'flattened and deadened' in to abstract objects, primed for commodity capture to create economic value ([Büscher, Sullivan, Neves, Igoe, & Brockington, 2012, pp. 8–23](#)). Furthermore, it allows neoliberalism to turn the environmental crises it has created into new commodities, as sources of accumulation ([Büscher et al., 2012](#); [Fletcher, 2011, p. 451](#); [West & Carrier, 2004, pp. 23–24](#)). Finally, neoliberalism has made global travel easier via increased wealth in some areas of the world, the development of international travel networks and the proliferation of tour operators opening up the South to tourism, as a core industry for (neoliberal) economic development.

It is important to offer a nuanced view of tourism as neoliberalism on the ground, drawing out its complexities and unevenness ([Brenner & Theodore, 2002](#); [Castree, 2008b](#)). [Brenner and Theodore \(2002\)](#) note that there is a tendency to assume that neoliberalism is hegemonic, and therefore it is ascribed with greater powers and coherence than it really has (also see [Peck & Tickell, 2002](#); [Walker & Cooper, 2011](#); [Mirowski and Plehwe \(eds\), 2009](#)). If we characterise neoliberalism as a hegemonic system, we can be tempted to (erroneously) assume that its effects are always negative. A more nuanced analysis of neoliberalism, in the form of tourism, also reminds us that the impacts and outcomes are not unremittingly negative ([Castree 2008b, p. 166](#)). This paper specifically tackles how neoliberalism is operationalized on the ground, in this case in the production of safari tourism experiences to draw out its effects for captive elephants and for the people who work with them.

### **Research methods**

Interactive experiences with elephants in Botswana provide a very useful example of the inter-relationships between nature, tourism and neoliberalism. The development of luxury safari tourism, especially in the Okavango Delta reveals how nature is reconfigured to create new products for global

consumption. This paper is based on a total of three months fieldwork in Botswana during 2008/9. It was part of a wider programme of research comparing elephant riding practices in Thailand and Botswana, and the study involved 75 interviews in Kasane, Maun and Gaborone (Botswana) and in Bangkok and Chiang Mai (Thailand). Kasane, Maun and Chiang Mai are the main areas for elephant riding in each country. Undertaking research in the capital cities of Gaborone and Bangkok allowed us to access the relevant wildlife, conservation and tourism authorities associated with each country.

Interviewees in Botswana were drawn from a wide range of stakeholders, including wildlife NGOs, tour operators, lodge and camp owners and tourist guides. We used standard snowballing techniques to generate lists of potential interviewees, this of course meant that the interviewees were a 'self-selecting' list since we were reliant on representatives of relevant organizations agreeing to be interviewed. That said, only one organization in Botswana declined an interview, and opted for a short telephone conversation instead. The wider research project provided an important context for the fieldwork in Botswana and allowed comparisons to be drawn with the development of elephant riding for tourism in Asia (see [Duffy & Moore, 2010](#)). A number of the interviews have been anonymised to protect the identities of participants because they offered criticisms of the industry they were employed in, and revealing their identity exposes them to risks of reprisals. The study used qualitative semi structured interviewing and documentary analysis as the most appropriate and effective means of understanding the elephant riding industry. The interviews and observations were supported by analysis of documentary evidence from NGOs, Government agencies and tour operators.

### **The profile of tourism in Botswana**

Tourism is a critical sector in Botswana because it is one of the largest income earners for the country (interview with representative of the Department of Tourism). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) the total contribution of travel and tourism to Gross Domestic Product was US\$ 1,048.50 million (BWP8,150.2mn, 6.5% of GDP) in 2011, and the WTTC estimates that this will rise by 5.6% pa to US\$ 1,961.91 million (BWP15,250.1mn) in 2022; further, in 2011 travel and tourism directly supported 18,500 jobs (3.1% of total employment), which WTTC estimates will rise by 3.2% pa to 28,000 jobs (3.6% of total employment) in 2022 ([WTTC, 2012, p. 1](#)).

The importance of the tourism industry to national economic development led the Government of Botswana to commission a Botswana Tourism Development Plan, funded by the European Union in 2000 ([Government of Botswana, 2002, p. ii](#)). The industry is promoted at international tourism fairs, such as the World Travel Market and the Japanese Association of Wild Travel Market. The major markets are South Africa, the US and Europe (particularly Germany and the UK), and the Department of Tourism hopes to develop a more robust market in Asia, especially Japan (interview with representative of the Department of Tourism).

The Botswana 'brand' revolves primarily around wildlife and wilderness, with some promotion of cultural and heritage tourism, plus a more recent interest in the potential for tours to link with the success of the Number 1 Ladies Detective agency book series. (pers comm, academic researcher, Botswana; see Botswana Tourism Board, Undated); [Mbaiwa \(2008\)](#) and [Keitumetse \(2009\)](#). For example, the Botswana Tourism Board states

'Parks and reserves have been established for the protection of the wildlife. Here, in the wilderness of Botswana, it is you who are the intruder and your presence is a privilege'. (Botswana Tourism Board, Undated b)

Furthermore, the National Ecotourism Strategy for Botswana states:

'Wildlife and—to a lesser extent—wilderness, are far and away Botswana's biggest holiday tourism draws. This is reflected in visitor numbers to the country's national parks, which increased from 76,742 in 1995 to 125,088 in 1997: a rise of 63%. The great majority of these are visits to parks in the north of the country.'[\(Government of Botswana, 2002, p. 2\)](#)

Botswana has deliberately pursued a policy of high end/low impact safari tourism which relies on the luxury travel market. This is based on the idea that Botswana will derive maximum revenue from minimal disruption to the environment. However, the development of the wildlife and wilderness brand in Botswana has not been unproblematic. In the case of upscale luxury safari tourism industry in Botswana, Mbaiwa notes that it produces similar problems to enclave tourism in the Caribbean and elsewhere; namely that the main profits go to foreign companies, there is little benefit to local communities and the lodges/safari concessions are highly exclusive and potentially exclusionary (Mbaiwa, 2004). Even the National Ecotourism Strategy notes the losses to the national economy via payments to external tour operators and providers of other goods and services to the tourism industry (Government of Botswana, 2002, p. 1).

Despite this clear focus on promoting wildlife and wilderness, the development of interactive experiences with trained elephants is a new and interesting direction. It is one small, but growing, part of the Southern African tourism industry; it relies on development of close interactions with elephants, including elephant riding and walking with elephants. Historically these experiences are not part of the standard safari package, but have become a high end/luxury tourism product in the last decade, and can now be found in South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Elephant rides cost upwards of US\$150 per person per hour. In Botswana close interactions with elephants are sold as part of an accommodation package in fly-in luxury camps costing between US\$500 and US\$2000 per night, (Living With Elephants, Undated).

Interactions with elephants are also offered as a single, short experience during a wider safari trip: it is possible for tourists to Botswana to incorporate elephant trekking as part of a day trip to Victoria Falls on the Zambian and Zimbabwean side of the border (African Odyssey Programme of Tourist Activities, Chobe Marina Lodge, Kasane; also see Safari Par Excellence, Undated a). The case of interactive elephant safaris in Botswana adds to our comprehension of how tourism drives forward the logics of neoliberalism by targeting and opening up new frontiers in nature. This use of a specific case means the neat lines and models generated via theoretical debates can be traced, refined, critiqued and challenged (Bakker, 2009; Castree, 2008b). This is the subject of the next section.

### **Tourism, neoliberalism and nature: conceptual context and debate**

In this paper I characterise neoliberalism as a 'nebuleuse' of ideas, institutions and organisations that create conditions favourable to neoliberalism, so that it appears as natural, neutral and as if there is no alternative (see Cox 1996; Gill 1998; Overbeek, 1993). During the past 20 years we have seen the global expansion of neoliberalism, including the roll back of states coupled with a roll forward of new forms of regulation to facilitate private interests, the expansion of market based mechanisms to new natural resources such as water and genetic material, as well as the privatisation of public services (Brand & Gorg, 2008; Castree, 2008a; Cox, 1996; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004, pp. 275–277; Harvey 2005; Heynen & Robbins, 2005; Heynen et al., 2007; Peck & Theodore, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Overbeek, 1993). However, one of the key contributions of this paper is to offer a more nuanced and differentiated view of it via an analysis of an empirical case. This allows us to understand how neoliberalism transforms nature into an expanding range of new commodities (see Neves, 2010). In this paper I am concerned with how neoliberalism, in the guise of tourism, produces globally marketable commodities in the form of interactive experiences with trained elephants.

Defining neoliberalism itself and identifying what is especially 'neoliberal' about safaris with trained elephants is no easy task. In order to do this I examine how nature-based tourism recreates and redefines nature in ways that make it more compatible with the logics of neoliberalism. Debates about the precise nature of neoliberalism are already well covered in the literature, and there is a growing body of critical scholarship on the neoliberalisation of nature, which aims to understand why the natural world is such an important target (see Bakker, 2005; Bakker, 2010; Castree, 2009, 2008a, 2008b, 2003). The connections between neoliberalism, nature and tourism are deeply, if not inextricably interwoven but they are not a major focus of research in tourism studies.

Büscher (2010) suggests that neoliberalism has produced 'derivative nature' in the sense that the value of nature must be brought into the realm of commodities and priced in monetary terms

(Büscher, 2010, p. 271). In Büscher's terms, the constructed and the real remain closely tied, so that derivatives allow capitalism to become increasingly self-referential and to create value out of itself, further fuelling bubble of neoliberalism (Büscher, 2010, p. 272; also see Büscher et al., 2012; Fletcher, 2011, pp. 449–451). As such, the capitalisation of nature has become a central characteristic of current capitalism (Zeller, 2008, p. 91). As Büscher et al. suggest, environmental initiatives increasingly *entrain* nature to capitalism, while creating more possibilities for capitalist expansion—nature (paradoxically) seems to have become the 'friend of capitalism' (Büscher et al. 2012, p. 7; also see Brockington and Duffy, 2010). It is important to note that capitalism is inherently expansionist, and strives to bring more and more facets of life into its orbit, including nature (Büscher et al. 2012, p. 8), and tourism is a critically important means by which this is achieved.

One of the main processes through which nature can be reconfigured through tourism is via commodification. This involves the creation of economic value from landscapes, animals and experiences. One of the core justifications for nature-based tourism is that nature can be conserved or saved because of its 'market value', and hence it can be commodified (see Büscher et al. 2012, pp. 12–23; Fletcher, 2010; McAfee, 1999, 2012; Neves, 2010; West & Carrier, 2004).

In the arena of tourism, nature is produced, reproduced and redesigned as a tourist attraction. In the process it is drawn in to the global tourism marketplace as a product to be consumed and to make profit (see Bianchi, 2004; Neves, 2010; Reid, 2003; West & Carrier, 2004, pp. 2–6). The tourism industry relies on designing and creating new commodities that clients will pay to see or experience; and this includes the production of close encounters with animals.

Bulbeck presents an excellent analysis of the production of close encounters with dolphins at Monkey Mia in Western Australia; her study indicates the ways nature, in the form of 'wild' dolphins are 'entrained' (in Büscher's et al. (2012) terms) and reconfigured to create products to sell as interactive tourist experiences. The dolphins are encouraged to visit the bay via strategies of feeding and interaction with tourists in the long term, but the problems associated with producing such interactions, including poor health and shortened lifespans for dolphins are rendered invisible to tourists (see Bulbeck, 2004).

Processes of commodification create new 'products' which are promoted as a means by which people can (quite literally) *touch* the wild, and they are proliferating across the globe, from diving with sharks to walking with lions to swimming with seals. Interactive animal tourism has become a critical niche in nature-based tourism. Neves (2010) argues in her study of whale watching tourism, that most operators present and market the product they sell as if it were not a commodity *and* as if it were not based on capitalist relations amongst different groups of people. In tourism this is evident in the ways that tour operators and conservation NGOs encourage tourists to seek out spectacular landscapes or rare wildlife: marketing experiences with nature with the exhortation to 'see it before it's too late' or 'before everyone else finds out'. The challenges and problems this creates for interactive elephants are discussed later in this paper.

The expansion of tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa is interlinked with the global extension of neoliberalism. Global tourism flows rapidly increased in response to greater prosperity and social and economic shifts in the industrialised world, which allowed larger numbers of people to engage in overseas travel; and this further developed into a variety of more specialised markets for ethical, responsible or green travel which reflect the changing holidaying tastes of societies in the North (Butcher, 2003). The statistics on tourism show how much it has grown, and recent figures suggest that although world tourism was negatively affected by the global recession, this was short lived and the industry has already begun to recover (possibly due to the growth of tourism from China and India).

The UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) estimates that tourism to Africa increased by 9 per cent in 2009, and it was the only region to show growth that year, assisted by the worldwide publicity created by the FIFA World Football Cup hosted by South Africa. Despite the fluctuations in tourism, the figures for 2010 indicate that global tourism has returned to pre-financial crisis levels. According to the latest issue of the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, international tourist arrivals are estimated to have grown by 4.5% in the first half of 2011, consolidating the 6.6% increase registered in 2010. Between January and June of 2011, the total number of arrivals reached 440 million, 19 million more than in the same period of 2010, and it estimates that there will be 1.6 billion tourist arrivals in 2020 (World Tourism Organisation, 2012).

The growth of tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa means it is a highly attractive option for governments, the private sector and international organisations as a potential means of delivering economic growth. The Regional Tourism Organisation for Southern Africa (RETOSA) is a branch of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and it promotes tourism as a way to create jobs, boost economies and alleviate poverty; it also aims to increase in-bound tourism to the region and raise awareness of the investment opportunities for the private sector (RETOSA, Undated). Equally, the African Travel and Tourism Association (ATTA) represents the private sector, including tour operators, hoteliers and transport providers; it views tourism as a way of producing economic development (African Travel and Tourism Association, Undated).

The development of interactive experiences with elephants should also be seen in the context of a longer history of commodification of nature in Africa, which intersects with more recent dynamics of neoliberalism. Exploring these links allows us to examine what is new about interactive experiences.

Elephants have been commodified in different ways: as sources of valuable products such as ivory, skins, meat and hides, and then later as hunting trophies and as key species in photographic tourism. This process of commodification helped drive global trade from the continent in the pre-colonial era, and then it supported and funded an age of European imperial expansion, and more recently elephants have been recreated as central components of a 'wilderness' tourist experience (see Adams, 2004; Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008, pp. 17–46; MacKenzie, 1988, pp. 19–38).

While more recent conservation initiatives use a more integrated approach, the image of wilderness remains an important underpinning to the safari industry in Africa. Yet, they are manufactured landscapes, created by a long history of evictions and exclusions of local communities (for further discussion see Brockington et al., 2008, pp. 17–46; Adams, 2004).

More recently new forms of interactions with nature have developed. These are more explicitly related to neoliberalism as nature is decontextualised to entrain it to the logics of capitalism. These include close interactions with animals such as elephant riding safaris, encounters with lions and riding ostriches (Safari Par Excellence, Undated b; Cango Ostrich, Undated). In many ways the use of trained animals disrupts the idea that safari tourism is based around stereotypes of wildlife and wilderness, yet the case of interactive experiences with elephants indicates that these new commodities are presented and marketed as 'back to nature' products.

Interactive experiences, especially with trained captive animals disrupt blunt and dichotomous categorisations of wild versus domestic or wilderness versus produced/manufactured landscapes. This leads us on to the debate about how to conceptualise and interrogate the role of animals in the links between tourism, nature and neoliberalism.

I explicitly view nature, in the form of trained elephants, as active participants. This intersects with recent debates about the complex inter-relationships between human and non-human nature, which attempt to break free of such binary or dualistic understandings. Lorimer argues, in the case of Asian trained elephants, that they are companion species par excellence, that humans and elephants have co-evolved and that mahoutship is the most obvious expression of this (Bates et al., 2007; Bradshaw, 2009; Braun, 2008; Lorimer & Whatmore, 2009; Lorimer, 2010, p. 492; also see Whatmore, 2002; Lorimer, 2010). As Bakker (2010, p. 718) suggests this helps us to be more sensitive to the pitfalls of seeing nature as a passive backdrop, or victim of global forces. I will now turn to Southern Africa to explore how interactive elephant experiences as tourism products reflect contemporary patterns of neoliberalism.

### **Elephants, tourism and neoliberalism in Southern Africa**

Interactive experiences with trained elephants are a useful example of the connections between nature, tourism and neoliberalism. This section outlines the profile of interactive elephant safaris in Botswana, including how they promote their products as 'back to nature' experience, divorced from the global dynamics that make them possible. In Botswana, the luxury safari camps that offer interactive experiences with elephants are located in the Okavango Delta, which is the centre-piece of Botswana's 'wilderness tourism' product (Pers comm. academic researcher, Botswana).

Abu Camp is the most expensive luxury resort in the Okavango Delta—costing approximately US\$2000 per night (Abu Camp, Undated). Abu Camp was the first operator to offer elephant back safaris in Southern Africa in the early 1990s. It is now run by a large South African operator, Wilderness Safaris, promoting itself as a 'responsible ecotourism and conservation company'. A former manager and researcher at Seba Camp (a sister camp) commented that tourists show a lot of interest in the elephants and want to know more about the research programmes at Abu Camp, which include work on releasing captive elephants back in to the wild (as discussed below) (interview with researcher and former Manager of Seba Camp; pers comment academic researcher, UK; and see Wilderness Safaris, Undated a).

It is owned by a former animal trainer from America, Randall Moore, who brought the first trained elephants to the camp in 1990. Moore has hired his elephants out for film, television and advertising. For example, the camp is named after Abu, the original male elephant which was brought from the US to South Africa to star in the film, *The Power of One*. Since then the Abu Camp elephants have appeared in diverse formats including adverts for Cote d'Or chocolate, and when the Miss World Contest was held in South Africa the elephants were used as part of the show (Elephant Back Safaris, 2008). Apart from their media appearances, the elephants are used for safaris, when tourists can ride the elephants or walk with them whilst viewing wildlife. Abu Camp presents its experiences in the following way:

'Guests at Abu Camp are invited to become part of the elephant herd during their stay: watching the evening feeding, sharing the simple joy of a frolicking youngster, and accompanying them on foot as they move through the bush. These elephant encounters provide unforgettable magical moments.' (Wilderness Safaris, Undated b)

Elephant experiences, rather like the whale watching tours studied by Neves (2010), are presented as though they are not a commodity or product, instead they are presented as an opportunity for interaction, companionship and sharing, akin to the lively and convivial relationships set out by Lorimer (2010); also see Lorimer, 2007. This scripts out the underlying reality that guests have purchased a manufactured experience and that they are part of a global industry that makes it possible for them to 'share' in elephant lives. Abu Camp promotes the activity as a way that tourists can feel they are part of the elephant herd and can get closer to the wildlife because it is somehow more 'natural' than using a vehicle:

'Whether walking alongside them or seated in large padded saddles mounted behind experienced elephant-handlers, to join a herd of the largest land mammals on a walk through the bush is to see Africa from a completely different perspective. Surrounded as you are by the herd, many other animals allow you to approach closer than ever'. (Abu Camp, Undated)

However, the trained elephants are offered as decontextualised forms of nature: they have been divorced from the wider context of the ecosystem and been entrained to the logics of global capitalism to make them commodities. Abu Camp uses elephant *riding* as their unique selling point; it differs from other interactive elephant experiences in Botswana. Two other camps, Baines Camp and Stanley's Camp offer *walking* with elephants, but are quite clear that they do not allow or promote elephant riding. Baines and Stanley's Camps are exclusively for clients booked through Sanctuary Retreats—a division of the global safari company Abercrombie and Kent (Sanctuary Retreats, Undated a). The elephants are owned by Sandi and Doug Groves who run a company, 'Grey Matters', and an NGO, 'Living with Elephants' (LWE) (Living With Elephants, Undated).

LWE was founded in 1999 by Douglas and Sandi Groves with three adopted elephants, Jabu, Thembi and Morula. LWE offers walking with elephants as a means of educating tourists about elephant conservation issues, and each walk lasts approximately four hours which includes information about the individual working elephant and about elephant management issues in general (interview with representative of Living with Elephants, Botswana). LWE estimated that 70% of their clients were American, the remainder were mostly European. Sandi Groves stated that they welcomed the opportunity to answer comments and criticisms from guests because it provided a chance to explain their operation and how the elephants were cared for (interview with representative of Living with Elephants, Botswana). As such, they openly tackle how the interactive experiences are produced and maintained.

LWE are keen to demonstrate their commitment to elephant welfare; for example, the elephants spend all day out 'in the bush' but are taken in at night for their own safety. A representative of LWE argued that it is important that the elephants have a good quality of life and that they would not continue if the elephants were not well looked after (interview with representative of Living with Elephants, Botswana).

LWE's mission statement is that it is 'dedicated to creating harmonious relationships between people and elephants. LWE has tried to find ways in which their foster elephants can act as ambassadors for their wild counterparts' (Living With Elephants, Undated). This is in line with [Neves \(2010\)](#) argument that a core claim of ecotourism is that it conserves the environment while contributing to sustainable livelihoods, especially in the South. The key motivation for LWE is to 'reduce competition between elephants and human populations in Botswana' (Living With Elephants, Undated). The captive elephants are promoted as a method for ensuring conservation of their wild counterparts through the 're-education' of African communities. During the low season, LWE use their elephants to provide educational tours for 22 schools in the Okavango Delta area to educate children into having a more 'positive' view of elephants (interview with representative of LWE).

Sandi Groves commented that the trips were for 9–12 year olds because they are the most receptive to learning about elephants. The trips are free to Government schools but private schools pay a small fee. The children also learn about the potential for jobs in the tourism sector while they are taken on game drives or shown Stanley's or Baines Camps (interview with representative of LWE). The use of captive elephants for educational purposes and school trips to the luxury lodges are one way in which the lodge and tour operators maintain their concession and operator licences. It is a Government stipulation that all safari concessions must provide a package of benefits for local communities (see [Mbaiwa, 2004](#) for further discussion). In this sense the trained elephants perform another role: as educators for local communities, while also acting as guides and service providers (transport) for tourists.

LWE describe the 'walking with elephants' experience as elephant centric, underlining the 'agency' of the animals themselves (see [Lorimer, 2010](#); [Bradshaw, 2009](#); and [Braun, 2008](#)). Tourists are encouraged to imagine they see the world through elephant eyes in order to get an experience that is closer to nature, via touching and interacting with trained elephants:

'see the wilds of Africa through the eyes of an elephant—a truly uplifting experience that makes a lasting impression on all who share their time with the elephants'.

(Sanctuary Retreats, Undated b)

The ways elephants are used for interactive experiences with tourists is indicative of the links between tourism, neoliberalism and nature. Nature is reconfigured as a product for global consumption but this is not necessarily entirely negative for elephants themselves. Owners and managers of trained elephants do emphasise the complex inter-linkages with 'wild herds', their efforts in wider elephant conservation and the importance of caring for trained elephants. However, the problems associated with the wider interactive elephant industry are discussed below.

### **The production of interactive elephant experiences in Botswana**

The problems in this emerging industry in Southern Africa provide a more nuanced understanding of neoliberalism as it is operationalized on the ground.

It is important to interrogate how interactive experiences with animals are produced in the first place. This allows us to examine how neoliberalism, has captured, entrained and reconfigured elephants to allow the tourism industry to expand and grow. It allows us to think through the dynamics of neoliberalism on the ground and how it is operationalized at the micro- scale (see [Brenner & Theodore, 2002](#)). It is important to delve behind the scenes to examine how interactive elephant experiences are created and produced in order to be sold to tourists. We can then lay bare the complex connections between neoliberalism, tourism and nature more visible, which is an under-researched area in tourism studies. In essence, in promotional material the interactive trained elephants are almost completely divorced from the social and economic processes that produced them in the first

place. There are occasional references to the elephants being rescued from zoos or culls, and to how they are cared for in their new environments but beyond that there is little information on the how they are trained and how the interactive experiences are produced and maintained.

Unlike Asia there is little history of domesticating elephants in Africa. Therefore any elephants involved in interactive experiences with tourists are relatively new arrivals to captivity, which raises the question of how elephants are sourced and reconfigured for interactive experiences. In the wider Southern African region, the removal of wild elephants for training for the safari industry has been a major source of concern for international animal welfare organisations. There is a real problem with taking older elephants from the wild to be trained for riding in the safari industry, especially elephants that were 8–10 years old because the training is harder on the people and on the elephants, two to three years olds are easier to train, as are elephants born in captivity.

In Botswana interactive experiences rely on elephants that formerly lived in circuses, zoos and safari parks, or calves who survived elephant culling operations. These animals cannot easily be returned to national parks, so supporters argue that training them for work in the tourism industry could improve their fate in the long term. LWE explained that their operations began in this way, as a means of caring for elephants not suited to release (interview with representative of LWE).

The camps also argue that they are committed to rehabilitating trained elephants so that they can return to national parks whenever possible. Abu Camp has an active research programme to explore how trained elephants can be reintegrated into herds in national parks. Between 2002 and 2003 four males and one female were released, and their progress was compared with that of their wild counterparts (thus far they have adapted very well) (interview with academic researcher, UK). However, these camps now face a new challenge as their trained elephants begin to reproduce. Abu Camp has two calves that were born to their trained elephants in 2006 and 2008 (Abu Camp, Undated). This disrupts their argument that they use elephants that are 'rescued' from circuses, safari parks and culling operations. This contrasts with LWE, their plan is to find a way to retire their three elephants and they will not be replacing them (interview with representative of LWE). This reveals a complicated pattern of problems and benefits for elephants involved in the interactive safari industry.

While many NGOs campaign against the development of elephant back safaris in Sub-Saharan Africa (as discussed below) their owners and trainers argue that they offer a better alternative for former zoo and circus animals, and that they play a role in educating tourists and local communities about elephant conservation more broadly. In this sense, they can claim that the effects of neoliberalism are not unremittingly negative, especially for the elephants themselves.

A further criticism levelled at the elephant riding industry in Botswana is that it is driven by profit. One interviewee stated there was a perception that you could make 'big bucks' from elephant riding, partly because of the high prices charged by lodges in Botswana. Inexperienced private operators have been drawn in—and the results were distressed elephants and mahouts who were injured or killed (anonymised interviewee (a), Botswana). This intersects with [Lorimer's \(2010\)](#) point that convivial and companion relationships between elephants and humans are often based on violence and even deaths. Most of the interactive elephant experiences in Botswana now use Motswana mahouts, although the initial mahouts came from Asia (especially Sri Lanka) to provide the relevant expertise. For example the first mahouts in Abu Camp were from Sri Lanka, but the camp now employs locally trained mahouts (interview with academic researcher, UK).

In Asia it is usual for mahouts to stay with an elephant for several decades. In Botswana since there is no long term history or culture of mahoutship then the elephant owners tend to hire in and train mahouts who work with the elephants for a shorter time. Taking on a trained elephant can constitute a 60 year commitment to a particular animal, which does not fit well with shorter term business interests (interview with academic researcher, UK; interview with representative of LWE; anonymous interviewee (b) Botswana).

This has raised concerns that the elephants do not benefit from a long term relationship with a single mahout, and the elephants can become unsettled and dangerous when mahouts are changed. One interviewee commented that consistency was very important—that the elephant needed to know boundaries, discipline, love and care and then they would respond positively to training and to the mahouts (anonymous interviewee (b), Botswana). Another interviewee, who worked with trained elephants, stated that they were concerned it would only be a matter of time before a tourist

was killed (anonymous interviewee (b), Botswana). In 2007 International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) released its report *'An Overview of the Commercial Use of Elephants in Captivity in South Africa'* arguing that a lack of standards and regulation in the elephant-back safari industry in Southern Africa meant that elephant tourist rides 'were accidents waiting to happen' (IFAW, 2006, 2007, Undated-a).

There have already been a number of deaths of mahouts working with elephants in Botswana—one of the most recent was at Mokolodi wildlife reserve near the capital Gaborone. It has been offering experiences of walking with elephants to tourists, but in April 2008 the Sri Lankan mahouts who had been training the elephants were found dead. It is not known how the accident happened (anonymous interviewee (a) Botswana; Elephant News, 2008). In separate incident, at Abu Camp in 2010, an Australian elephant expert who had previously worked at Taronga and Dubbo zoos was killed in an accident in the elephant enclosure (The Age, 2010; Sydney Morning Herald, 2010).

IFAW claims that tourists are at risk from badly trained, potentially dangerous elephants. Between 2005 and 2007 at least three handlers were killed, and there was a rise in incidences of injured tourists (IFAW, 2006, 2007, Undated-a). As discussed above, elephant trainers and mahouts have been injured and killed in accidents with their animals, but tourists themselves have also been injured in the emerging elephant riding industry. For example in 2007 a British couple were badly injured and hospitalised in South Africa after an accident on an elephant back safari in Elephant Sanctuary at Hartbeespoort; they suffered broken legs and pelvis' after falling as they tried to climb on to the elephants (The Daily Mail, 2007). It is clear that as elephants are reconfigured and trained for work in the tourism industry, it can result in injuries and deaths of mahouts, but also injuries to tourists. This is the darker side of neoliberalism, hidden from view in the marketing and promotion of new interactive animal experiences, in line with the critique offered by Buscher et al. (2012) that highlights the ways it stimulates and then conceals contradictions.

IFAW has actively campaigned against elephant back safaris in Southern Africa (IFAW, Undated-a). Its stated position is that 'elephant tourism is not responsible tourism, and should not be supported in any shape or form', and that it has no conservation value and is cruel and exploitative (IFAW, 2006). The Southern Africa Director of IFAW, Jason Bell-Leask, has stated that IFAW would like to ban it altogether; it views the industry as cruel, wrong, exploitative and driven by greed. As a result, IFAW devotes its energies into developing regulations to prevent further growth in elephant riding and to ensuring that captive elephants are well cared for (IFAW, 2007, 2010).

IFAW claims that elephant riding is rapidly increasing, with 25 per cent more elephants in captivity for commercial use, rising from 89 to 112 between 2005 and 2007 (IFAW 2007). The promotion of interactive experiences with trained elephants focuses on an ideal type scenario of how well elephants are cared for or how they might be rehabilitated for release to join 'wild' herds in national parks. The approach of organizations such as IFAW is open to criticism that it privileges Western cultural values, especially around appropriate relations between elephants and people (for further discussion see Duffy & Moore, 2011).

Concerns about animal welfare led to the creation of Elephant Management and Owners Association (EMOA) to draw up standards for the elephant back safari industry (EMOA, Undated); and African Conservation, Undated). As one interviewee put it, there is a need for standards of acceptability in terms of keeping and managing elephants, including levels of exercise, provision of food and acceptable working hours. Since this is a new industry elephant owners and managers lack experience, and may not know how to properly manage captive elephants (anonymous interviewee, UK). These concerns were underlined when undercover footage was released of young elephants being cruelly treated during training (anonymous interviewee, UK).

Bradshaw (2009) and Bradshaw et al. (2005) have thoroughly investigated the problems faced by trained elephants, 'surplus' baby elephants left over from culling, and survivors of major poaching operations; they argue that 'problem' elephants that attack trainers or exhibit other violent or anti-social behaviours (such as the well documented case of elephants killing rhinos in Pilanesburg National Park) are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In *Elephant Breakdown* Bradshaw et al. (2005) argue that maternal separation, disruptions to the natural bonding processes and the absence of social structures (such as older generations) contribute to hyper-aggression and to early musth cycles in younger males.

Furthermore, a recent study of elephants used for elephant back safaris in Letsatsing Game Reserve in South Africa revealed that elephants secreted a slightly higher level of glucocorticoid which indicated a higher level of stress on days when they interacted with tourists, when compared with days when they were not working (Millsbaugh et al., 2007). The serious concerns about animal welfare are largely ignored in the promotion of interactive elephant experiences as means of getting *in touch* with the wild. The development of standards to govern working conditions for trained elephants underlines that they have been recommodified in a new way, perhaps as service providers and workers in the tourism industry. This constitutes a shift in how nature (elephants) are entrained and made amenable to the logics of capitalism, but it also reveals the fundamental and underlying interlinkages between tourism and neoliberalism.

## Conclusion

Neoliberalism targets and opens up new frontiers in nature to the logics of global capitalism. This is apparent in the ways elephants are entrained, reconfigured and recreated to provide new products for consumption in the global tourism industry. They are ‘flattened and deadend’ (Büscher et al., 2012) because they are decontextualized from the wider ecosystem, which then allows neoliberalism to separate them out to facilitate commodity capture. However, it is also important to note that interactive elephant experiences can be regarded as part of the wider historical context of the commodification of elephants. Furthermore, the extension and deepening of neoliberal logics to new arenas is not necessarily entirely negative. Some captive elephants are not suited to release into national parks, so their fate can be improved if they are working in the tourism industry. However, the case of interactive experiences with elephants equally indicates how neoliberalism produces the negative aspects of tourism. The process of training and managing elephants can result in injuries and deaths of mahouts and tourists; further, the ways that interactive experiences are created and maintained raise serious welfare concerns. This does raise questions about the long term viability of this emerging industry in Southern Africa if tourists are convinced of the negative implications for elephant welfare. Examining interactive elephants in southern Africa indicates that it is vitally important that tourism studies tackles the interactions between neoliberalism and tourism in order to develop our understanding of the ways that the industry has extended and deepened its reach across the globe.

It is clear that there is a need for more critical interrogations of the links with neoliberalism, building on the analyses offered by West and Carrier (2004), Neves (2010) and Fletcher (2011) amongst others. We need to examine the neoliberal underpinnings of tourism and the ways this transforms, creates and recreates nature. It is especially important to understand how this produces new forms of interaction between animals and people and how it links in to debates about the welfare of animals as a labourforce for tourism. Further, we need to take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from, for example, international relations, anthropology, geography. It is vitally important that we develop a better conceptual framework, as well as more thorough empirical studies, for understanding the relationship of tourism to capitalism, especially since some scholars claim we are now in a ‘post-neoliberal’ world. This is particularly pressing when we think through how nature is captured, reconfigured and recreated by the tourism industry. In that sense it is critical that we examine the role neoliberalism as a core theme in tourism studies.

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- Anonymous interviewee, UK, 2008.

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