Scalar thickening: Wildlife management areas and conservation scales in southeast Tanzania

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Abstract

The debate on scale in geography has yielded nuanced concepts that have enhanced scale analysis and methodologies for scale-related research. Despite this advancement, questions still linger on the value of scale as a geographical vocabulary, partly because scalar analyses remain predicated on hierarchies, which have limited explanatory power. In this paper we draw on insight from political ecology to affirm and expand on the usefulness of scale for geographical inquiry and for engaging with contemporary people–environment relations. In particular, the paper appreciates that ecology is at the core of methodological questions pertaining to the explanation of these relations and is increasingly involved in the construction of biodiversity discourses and strategies that rely heavily on conceptions of, and pronouncements on, scale. We use the concept of scalar thickness as a way of thinking about how spaces of conservation are organized and the propensity of scales to coalesce at various stages of scale-producing processes. We argue that wildlife management areas in Tanzania have played a pivotal role in the thickening of the micro scale in the southeast region. These areas constitute the scale at and though which global conservation agendas are implemented and natural resource rights and benefits are contested.

Keywords: Scalar thickness; Wildlife management areas (WMAs); Transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs); Selous