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Table of contents

Acknowledgements	9
1. Introduction	13
1.1 National parks in Africa: A field of research	15
1.2 The park and the cotton city	29
1.3 Purpose and scope of the study	34
2. Archaeology of W national park	49
2.1 Emergence of a legal foundation	50
2.2 Reports, programs and donor money	53
2.3 ECOPAS	57
2.4 Current park administration	59
2.5 Chapter conclusion	62
3. Surveillance actors and discourses	65
3.1 Foresters	66
3.2 Eco-gardes	70
3.3 Trackers	72
3.4 The neighbor status as a negotiation resource	74
3.5 Chapter conclusion	86
4. Encounters in the bush	91
4.1 Patrolling Point Triple	92
4.2 What does patrolling mean?	100
4.3 „Milking cows“ and poor poachers	108
4.4 Cooperation obliges	129
4.5 „C’est notre champ“: Chapter conclusion	131
5. Encounters in the adjacent village	137
5.1 Investigating an elephant poaching case	138
5.2 Chains of actions between the sector and the village	148
5.3 Negotiation segments	155
5.4 „C’est ça seul qui nous reste“: Questionings	167
5.5 Chapter conclusion	178

6. Encounters at political forums	181
6.1 Mission Bissanidi	182
6.2 „Une bombe à retardement“: Disputing the buffer zone	188
6.3 „The elephants’ fight“: Key actors disputing	203
6.4 Chapter conclusion	224
7. Conclusion	229
8. References	241
9. Annex	259
9.1 List of important interlocutors	260
9.2 Abbreviations	262
9.3 Figures	263
9.4 Maps	264
9.5 Charts	264

Summary

W National Park is situated in the border triangle of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger in West Africa. Established under French colonial rule in 1927, it was designated first African transborder biosphere reserve in 2002. The park’s adjacent communities’ livelihoods are based on cash cropping, subsistence farming and transhumant cattle keeping. The scope and intensity of these activities are changing due to mechanization, the proliferating use of pesticides and fertilizers as well as high rates of population growth. These are also the key drivers of park encroachment. Conflicts on land and water proliferate not only between park administration and local population but also between park neighbors themselves. One of the key drivers of conflict is the overregulated and undermanaged buffer zone.

From 2000 until 2008, the conservation program ECOPAS, financed by a European project consortium, introduced systematic surveillance activities and added a more participatory approach to the repressive park administration regime. However, after ECOPAS’ phasing out the patrol teams’ motivation as well as community cooperativeness dried out. Subsequently, park foresters and rangers were increasingly regarded as occupying forces on strange territory who ignore fundamental local norms of subsistence and authority.

Drawing on predominantly historical, geographical works in the field of political ecology, this book follows the assumption that a national park is neither a natural nor technical but a

political construct. National parks are subject to political decisions by globally interconnected elites. In many cases, they not only contradict rural livelihoods, but also contravene national development plans. The structural conflict between conservation and socio-economic development plays out in local actors' strategies to negotiate access and control of resources. In these negotiation processes, the national park concept is being translated into the realities of local actors. Until now, few works have addressed this issue systematically from the point of view of the parties involved.

The present research work contributes to filling in this gap by explicitly taking the point of view of the park surveillance and administration employees and state foresters. It asks how surveillance teams operate in a context of low legitimacy and generalized illegal resource use. It delineates how park staff work in the protected area, how interaction situations between them and local stakeholders emerge and how these are managed. To provide a basis for subsequent chapters, the second chapter serves as a historical, legal and institutional introduction to park administration and conservation in Benin. The third chapter focuses on the main actors of park administration and surveillance: foresters, Eco-gardes (rangers) and trackers. It analyzes internal positioning struggles, narratives and discourses and shows how the concept of local participation is being used as a negotiation resource. Chapter four through six are dedicated to three different local political arenas where encounters between park staff and local actors take place. These are encounters in the core area of the national park, in adjacent villages and at local political forums. The situations observed have been analyzed using the extensive case study method.

The final chapter summarizes the main findings and draws a conclusion based on the results. It states that the concept behind the national park is being translated into local reality by the street level actors in the park patrol units. These actors face challenges being in constant negotiations with local actors and finding extralegal solutions while insisting on the rule of law as the dominant official version. The specific contextualized meaning of national park that emerges from this situation is a social construct coined by hierarchical power relationships between the parties involved. The book argues that this feature is not inherent to the national park idea but evolves from the local reality. The concept of national park is not the origin of inequality; rather, the local reality is at the origin of the national park being used as a vehicle for establishing hierarchy and social control. These results yield implications for the practice of park management and the challenge of reconciling conservation and socio-economic development. As a first step, park management may acknowledge officially the fact that everyday procedures in park surveillance and administration are based on negotiation

processes. As a second element, conflict management should become a major issue as conservation in practice often implies law enforcement in a reality affected by pluralism of rules and regulations.