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The transformation of the South African national parks with special reference to the role of the Social Ecology Directorate 1994-2004

Poonan, Ulli Unjinee

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Abstract

This dissertation critically examines the transformation of the South African National Parks with special reference to the role of the Social Ecology Directorate during the period 1994-2004. The establishment of a non-racial democratic social order required a different approach to the conservation of biodiversity which involved substantive change. This change included the organisation confronting its role in the apartheid legacy of dispossession, environmental racism and injustice. The Social Ecology Directorate and the concept of Social Ecology were established by the South African National Parks to drive a process of transformation. However, it is argued that these ideas and structures were not strong and cohesive enough to do so. Nevertheless the dissertation suggests that during this period, in a series of complex and contested processes, constrained but significant change was achieved in four areas: a shift to a more people-centred and developmental approach to conservation, restructuring to make the organisation more representative and to eliminate racism and sexism, land restitution, improved relations with neighbouring communities and greater inclusivity and openness to all South Africans through the promotion of tourism and cultural heritage. These changes laid the basis potentially for more radical change which links the conservation of biodiversity to social justice.