

## Orchestrating Consent: Post-politics and Intensification of Nature™ Inc. at the 2012 World Conservation Congress

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### Abstract

This article reports on the results of a collaborative event ethnography (CEE) conducted at the 2012 World Conservation Congress (WCC) on Jeju Island, South Korea. The WCC is organised every four years by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which bills the Congress as the world's most important conservation forum. Hence, analysis of the event illuminates current and future trends in the global conservation movement. This analysis builds on a previous study conducted at the 2008 WCC in Barcelona, Spain, which provides something of a baseline for assessing changes in conservation policy in the intervening period. I contend that one of the most salient trends at the 2012 WCC was a dramatic increase in emphasis on market-based mechanisms and corporate partnerships, elements of a growing global pattern that has been called 'neoliberal conservation' or 'Nature™ Inc.', on the part of IUCN leadership and its major partners, particularly the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). While this agenda remains actively contested by elements of the IUCN's membership, little of this contestation was reflected in the Congress's public spaces. I therefore describe the WCC as an effort to 'orchestrate' the appearance of general consent around a neoliberal agenda—a dynamic that I characterise, following recent theorisation, as 'post-political'—by means of a variety of strategies, including staging consensus, synchronising discourse, expanding alliances, disciplining dissent, appropriating a 'radical' agenda, and 'cynical' reasoning.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, collaborative event ethnography, post-politics, ecosystem services, natural capital, IUCN, WBCSD, World Conservation Congress

I think I can safely say that it's probably now a permanent fixture; that markets and business are not going to go away in the IUCN agenda and are likely to go from strength to strength.

—Joshua Bishop, IUCN Chief Economist, at the 2008 WCC in Barcelona (cited in MacDonald 2010a: 270)

### INTRODUCTION

This article reports on research conducted at the 5<sup>th</sup> World Conservation Congress (WCC) hosted by the International

Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on Jeju Island, South Korea, September 6–15, 2012. Part of a 'collaborative event ethnography' (CEE) by a small group of social scientists, this analysis builds on a similar project undertaken at the previous WCC in Barcelona, Spain, in 2008, most of the results of which were published in a previous special issue of this journal (Brosius and Campbell 2010a). The IUCN describes itself as "the largest global environmental network", comprising over 1000 member organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, from more than 140 countries, and bills the WCC, held every four years, as "the world's largest and most important conservation event". Hence, as MacDonald (2010a: 260) maintains, the WCC can be seen as an important "mechanism through which ideological perspectives can be circulated, gain traction, and begin to structure both policy and the material practice of biodiversity conservation".

In this respect, the present study contends that one of the most salient features of the 2012 WCC was a striking increase in the advocacy of so-called market-based mechanisms and

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private sector participation in conservation policy and practice by many of the Congress's most prominent players—from the IUCN Secretariat, to participants in the World Leaders Dialogue events, to contributors to numerous individual forum sessions—representing a diversity of governmental, non-governmental, and private sector-based organisations. The study thus builds on a growing body of research describing a similar neoliberal restructuring within the global conservation movement as a whole, characterised by a retraction in state-centered command-and-control regulation and a concomitant increase in 'non-state actors' including NGOs and private firms. These actors increasingly advocate engagement with capitalist markets through reliance on mechanisms such as ecotourism, payment for environmental services, carbon markets, biodiversity and wetlands banking, and others intended to monetise *in situ* natural resources, and thereby incentivise their conservation. This trend has received a number of different labels, including 'market environmentalism', 'green capitalism', 'green neoliberalism', 'grabbing green', 'neoliberal conservation', and, more recently, 'Nature™ Inc.'<sup>1</sup>

In his contribution to the collaborative study of the 2008 Congress, MacDonald (2010a: 270) highlights this same dynamic, concluding that "the WCC can be treated as a site in the neoliberal restructuring of conservation". Hence, I contend, the 2012 Congress signified an intensification<sup>2</sup> (Nealon 2008) of this restructuring, wherein "the personal associations and ideological work necessary for the renegotiation of the organisational order [were]acted out" (MacDonald 2010a: 257), a neoliberal agenda aggressively promoted, and opposition to this agenda quelled. As an ideology, neoliberal conservation has been advanced through a diversity of strategies (Büscher et al. 2012), among which are the organisation of periodic meetings such as the WCC, which serve to "produce enough permanence and cohesion to create an organisational culture in which norms of individual and collective behavior become easily known, learned, and circulated" (MacDonald 2010a: 259).

This article describes the neoliberal intensification characterising the 2012 WCC. Intensification here refers to levels of discourse, policy, and practice simultaneously—the rhetoric through which neoliberal ideas were propagated, the adoption of business logic in policy prescriptions, and the advocacy of market-based mechanisms in conservation practice. In my analysis, I highlight the occurrence of a number of other dynamics documented by previous research on neoliberal conservation as well as several novel ones, outlining six significant strategies—staging consensus, synchronising discourse, expanding alliances, disciplining dissent, appropriating a 'radical' agenda, and 'cynical' reasoning—by means of which market mechanisms and private sector engagement were promoted at the Congress. While little of this analysis is wholly original, primarily documenting a merely quantitative increase in trends observed in previous studies, I believe that, in aggregate, these dynamics constitute a significant qualitative shift in the way in which a neoliberal agenda is playing out in mainstream conservation

circles at present. I suggest, in short, that we stand at a pivotal moment in the historical progression of the conservation movement, in which neoliberal rationality seems to be on the brink of retreating from the space of public discussion and debate, and instead becoming merely the underlying 'common sense' of mainstream conservation policy. In Bourdieuan terms, we could say that neoliberal logic has moved from a position of heterodoxy to orthodoxy and is now in danger of becoming doxa, the unquestioned—and hence unquestionable—background framework within which explicit discussion occurs (Bourdieu 1977). In a novel contribution to the literature exploring how neoliberalism functions as an ideology sustaining faith in the efficacy of market-based conservation mechanisms, I characterise this situation as one in which conservation discourse is becoming increasingly 'post-political', evidencing an ostensibly widespread consensus concerning the legitimacy of neoliberal logic and mechanisms grounded in what appear to be wholly technocratic questions of efficiency and cost-benefit ratios from which political considerations and debates are largely effaced.

In highlighting this dynamic, this article seeks to help preserve a space within which the legitimacy and efficacy of neoliberal conservation can continue to be discussed and challenged—a space vital to the practice of a properly democratic politics (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2006). I begin by situating this study within the history of investigation concerning neoliberal conservation and the event ethnography thereof. I then briefly characterise the 2012 WCC and the CEE conducted there. Subsequently, I describe neoliberal intensification at the Congress and the main strategies through which this was advanced. I conclude by highlighting some of the significant gaps in the logic informing this neoliberal agenda, and calling for sustained attention to the way in which this agenda infiltrates conservation policy and practice in order to preserve it at the level of heterodox debate.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Neoliberal conservation, event ethnography, and post-politics

This article contributes to rapidly growing literature addressing neoliberalisation within global environmental conservation policy and practice by exploring the way in which neoliberalism functions as an ideology within this assemblage, helping to legitimise and conceal contradictions inherent within the deployment of market-based conservation mechanisms. In their recent synthesis of the neoliberalism conservation literature, Büscher et al. (2012: 5, emphasis in original) describe neoliberalism "as a political *ideology* that aims to subject political, social, and ecological affairs to capitalist market dynamics". They view this ideology as supported by a variety of techniques that conceal the gap between rhetoric and practice in the implementation of neoliberal conservation policies, thereby sustaining "the paradoxical idea that capitalist markets are the answer to their own ecological contradictions"

(Büscher 2012: 29). Among these techniques are: a conflation of neoliberal capitalism with ‘economics’ in general, such that non-neoliberal (e.g., Keynesian)—let alone non-capitalist—approaches to economic policy become increasingly unthinkable; promotion of a self-interested rational actor as characterising human nature in general; a tendency to project an image of unmitigated success despite deficiencies or complexities in actual practice in order to court funders; an attendant future-oriented focus minimising reflection on past challenges; assessing the “relationship between economic growth and the health of ecosystems... from a very selective perspective, eliminating information which suggests that economic growth could be harmful in terms of both environmental factors... and widening wealth differentials” (Büscher et al. 2012: 14); and silencing or marginalising dissenting voices through a variety of disciplinary tactics. The end result, the authors suggest, is a sort of “closed loop” thinking, “whereby in failing to take into account the wider processes of which it is part, the self-corrective actions of an ill-functioning system perpetuate illness-causing conditions, while providing temporary illusion of improvement” (Büscher et al. 2012: 14).

Igoe (2010, 2013) and Igoe et al. (2010) contribute to this analysis by describing the ways in which ‘spectacular’ images of nature, and its salvation by heroic conservationists and the increasingly sophisticated instruments they marshal in their cause, are disseminated via mass media in order to highlight positive outcomes and render contradictory evidence invisible. Büscher and Igoe (2013) relate how this dynamic is increasingly supported through web-based media that encourage ‘prosumption’—co-creation of products by consumers—of ostensive conservation ‘solutions’ that can be purchased and witnessed online. Brockington (2008, 2009) observes how the growing employment of celebrity advocates supports this spectacle, reinforcing the mystique of conservation as exciting and ‘sexy’ (Sullivan 2011). Elsewhere, I build on all of this to highlight the ways in which disavowal—a simultaneous admission and denial—of neoliberal conservation’s complexities in practice is facilitated through stimulation of fantasy and ‘public secrecy’ (Fletcher 2013a,b).

A growing segment of this literature describes meetings as important sites wherein the ideology of neoliberal conservation is developed and propagated, as noted above. In an early contribution, Büscher (2008) reports on the use of optimistic win-win rhetoric and metaphorical imagery (e.g., an expanding pie) to create what he calls a “discursive blur” in support of market-based conservation at the 2007 annual meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology in South Africa. The first sustained collaborative event ethnography of neoliberal conservation was conducted at the 2008 WCC, wherein contributors investigated a wide variety of issues, including treatment of biofuels (Maclin and Bello 2010), climate change (Hagerman et al. 2010), indigenous politics (Doolittle 2010), marine protected areas (Gray 2010), REDD (Reduced Emissions through Deforestation and Land Degradation) (Peña

2010), and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB)<sup>3</sup> initiative (Monfreda 2010). In this collection, MacDonald (2010a) drew on previous literature to describe how structuration and orchestration of spectacle facilitated the promotion of neoliberal conservation at the Congress. Elsewhere MacDonald (2013) considers processes of ‘cynical reasoning’ employed in this promotion as well.

Subsequently, a team including members of the 2008 study turned their attention to the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP10) of the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) in Nagoya, Japan in 2010. Following from this, Corson and MacDonald (2012) report on processes of ‘green grabbing’ and promotion of ‘natural capital’ via TEEB (MacDonald and Corson 2012) at the COP. Suarez and Corson (2013) describe the promotion of ‘ecosystem services’, another concept central to neoliberal conservation, via the TEEB initiative as well. Gruby and Campbell (2013) examine the representation of small island developing states at the convention. Hagerman et al. (2012) analyse how market-centred ‘carbon-logic’ predominated in discussions of the intersection of climate change and biodiversity. An overlapping group then investigated the 2012 Rio +20 summit, producing a preliminary report on the treatment of oceans at the summit (Campbell et al. 2013) and a wealth of work in progress.

This article builds on all of the above to develop its analysis of neoliberal intensification at the 2012 WCC. In addition to reiterating themes noted in previous research, it contributes a novel dimension to the neoliberal conservation literature by exploring how ‘post-politics’ contributes to the ideological hegemony of neoliberal logic in conservation policy and practice.<sup>4</sup> Recently, a number of theorists have described a growing condition of ‘post-politics’ or ‘post-democracy’ in contemporary societies characterised—as Swyngedouw (2010: 225) paraphrases—by “a politics in which ideological or dissensual contestation and struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration” (Žižek 1999; Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2006). In a series of interventions, Swyngedouw (2008, 2009ab, 2010, 2011a,b) applies this concept to the analysis of environmental politics, contending that “the particular way in which the environmental condition has been elevated to a matter of public concern can be mobilised as a way of grappling with the contested formation of a post-political frame” (2010: 216). Brockington (2014) develops an analogous discussion of how increasing promotion of celebrity advocacy in environmental politics contributes to ‘post-democracy’. In my analysis, I follow these authors in describing how a post-political frame was mobilised at the 2012 WCC in support of Nature™ Inc.

### The World Conservation Congress

The IUCN is divided into three main bodies: the Secretariat; the Commissions; and the general membership. The Secretariat is the Union’s principle programmatic body, including the Director General, President, Vice-President, and Chairs of the various Commissions. There are a number of Commissions,

each representing a specific theme such as Protected Areas, Environmental Law, and Environment, Economic, and Social Policy, composed of volunteer experts who work to produce best practice guidelines for governments and other agencies in their particular area. The general membership, finally, is composed of representatives of member organisations from around the world, divided into two chambers: government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). At the 2008 WCC, a new category was added for the first time: Partners, who may participate but not vote on motions; while at the 2012 Congress, the decision was taken to create a third voting chamber composed specifically of indigenous peoples groups.

The WCC comprises two main components: the Forum and the Members' Assembly. The Forum runs for several days, featuring a great diversity of sessions of different types offered concurrently throughout the day, including standard presentation, workshop, and poster sessions as well as several innovative modalities such as Knowledge Cafes (in which a small group of participants sit at a round table) and Conservation Campus events (in-depth half-day or full-day technical instruction sessions). Some of these events take place in enclosed conference rooms, while others are held at the open-air pavilions devoted to specific themes (protected areas, marine conservation, endangered species, etc.) dispersed through the main lobby. At the 2012 WCC, each of the Forum's five days was intended to address a particular theme, moving from Climate to Development, Life, Food, and finally People and Governance. The Members' Assembly, by contrast, is where all member organisations convene to discuss the Union's overarching agenda, and to deliberate and vote on conservation-related motions proposed by members. As Brosius and Campbell (2010b: 245-6) observe, "The contrast between the... Forum, a lively, busy, and often entertaining event spread out over multiple locales (we describe it as part conference, part trade show), and the Assembly, a formal parliamentary style proceeding operating under Robert's Rules of Order, is striking". Unlike in previous Congresses, where the Forum and Assembly were strictly separated, and the Assembly began after the Forum ended (Brosius and Campbell 2010b), at the 2012 WCC, the Assembly began on the third day of the Congress, running concurrently with the Forum for several hours each morning before the Forum ended and the Assembly took over completely for the remainder of the event. In addition to this change to the Forum and Members' Assembly, the 2012 WCC introduced an innovative series of World Leaders Dialogues, wherein each evening, after the conclusion of the day's other events, five prominent figures from government, civil society, and the private sector would convene on center stage to discuss that day's particular theme.

According to a 2013 IUCN press release, the 2012 WCC boasted "10,000 people, 5,000 conservation experts from 153 countries [and]600 events".<sup>5</sup> Yet such numbers do little to convey the tenor of the event. Take a standard academic conference and multiply it tenfold, and one begins to get a sense of the scale and energy of the Congress. Coordinating

an event of such size was a logistical feat of some magnitude. Participants were shuttled to and from numerous hotels dispersed throughout the island every morning and evening according to a bewildering bus schedule that, despite the provision of a glossy pictorial brochure, took an army of support staff to decipher. Upon arrival at the convention centre, perched on a bluff above the ocean, where the majority of Congress events took place, participants queued up to pass through a series of metal detectors and placed their bags on conveyer belts to be run through X-ray scanners. Then they emerged into a spacious lobby in which stood a number of pavilions representing different themes, as described earlier. On the edges of this area, rows of doors gave onto small auditoriums in which individual presentation sessions were held. Frenzied attendees rushed to and fro across the lobby floor continually.

From this lobby, escalators climbed to the second floor space in which the Members' Assembly was held: an enormous auditorium that accommodated all 5000+ official representatives and numerous observers with room to spare. Members sat at tables arranged in rows before a wide stage on which the Secretariat presided (Figure 1). Behind, two enormous screens displayed images of whoever was speaking at the moment. Addressing the assembly required pressing the button on one's intercom console and speaking into the microphone, at which point both one's visage and voice would be projected before the entire assembly.

The Congress's pace was quite rigorous. Events ran from early morning until late at night. One Members' Assembly session ended at midnight, followed by an hour's bus ride back to the hotel only to reboard the bus at 6:00 AM the next morning for the return trip for an 8:00 AM session opening.

Much of the Congress was pure spectacle (Igoe 2010; Igoe et al. 2010; MacDonald 2010a). The opening ceremony was particularly dramatic. Presided over by a professional Master of Ceremonies, it presented, as one component, a classic drama of fall and redemption in which dancers dressed like butterflies fled as the auditorium darkened and enormous drill bits bored outward through the screens, ushering in a post-apocalyptic world of industrial decay (Figure 2). Eventually, however, green foliage sprouted anew from this wasteland,



**Figure 1**  
*The members' assembly*



**Figure 2**  
*The opening ceremony*

the auditorium brightened and the dancers reemerged as the world was redeemed in an Edenic second coming. Likewise, at the end of the closing session triumphant music filled the air, while the screens strobed neon, and cannons arrayed along the auditorium's edges spewed paper butterflies over the crowd. Exiting, participants passed through a gauntlet of young ushers clapping and cheering wildly.

### **Studying the WCC**

Studying such a diffuse phenomenon as the WCC challenges traditional conventions of ethnographic research, demanding innovative multi-site techniques undertaken by multiple researchers working together. Hence, the research team convened by Brosius and Campbell (2010b) developed an approach they call collaborative event ethnography (CEE) to study the 2008 WCC (for details, see Brosius and Campbell 2010b; MacDonald 2010a), a method we sought to replicate in our own study of the 2012 Congress. This method treats meetings as key “venues where epistemic communities align and can be tracked, and where their ideological work is partly done” (Brosius and Campbell 2010b: 247). Indeed, at the 2012 WCC, I often felt that I was witnessing the real-time materialisation of ideology before my eyes. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that meetings are just one moment within a much longer process, involving countless other forms of exchange, both formal and informal, for months before and after the event proper, including pre- and post-meetings, email and listserv communications, and so forth (MacDonald 2010a).

In my contribution to the 2012 CEE, I sought to track the development and discussion of a business and market agenda at the WCC. To this end, I scoured the Congress programme for events addressing business- and economics-related themes, planning my attendance schedule to be able to participate in the maximum number and diversity of these. In this effort, I was greatly assisted by the circulation, prior to the Congress, of a World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)-endorsed list of events addressing “Business at the IUCN World Conservation Congress”. Nevertheless, the frequent occurrence of multiple overlapping events meant that my coverage of even the business-related sessions remained piecemeal, and I was forced to neglect almost entirely the many

events addressing other issues and themes. Coordinating with another member of the team interested in similar issues as I, however, we were able to divide our time to minimise overlap and achieve maximum coverage of business-related events. In addition, I did identify and attend several presentation sessions that promised to offer the greatest possibility of dissent from the neoliberal consensus. Moreover, I was able to attend the Members' Assembly, as well as the opening and closing sessions, in their entirety.

Detailed explanations of the CEE methodology employed in our study are provided in other sources (Brosius and Campbell 2010b; MacDonald 2010a; MacDonald and Corson 2012). Following now-standard protocol concerning data cross-referencing and analysis (Brosius and Campbell 2010b), we met as a team every morning and evening (and often over lunch as well) to compare observations and interpretations, and plan our daily schedules. At the end of the Congress, we conducted an extensive debrief, in which the preliminary results of our individual research projects were compared and discussed. Publications concerning other aspects of the Congress should be forthcoming in the near future.

Despite these various precautions, as in any ethnographic research, the perspective presented here remains decidedly partial (Clifford 1986), conditioned both by the limited nature of my experience and my positionality as a relative newcomer to the IUCN with a particular social network and set of ideological commitments. Acknowledging critiques of ‘capitolocentric’ thinking offered by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and others, I certainly do not want to convey the impression that neoliberal conservation was the only or even the main focus of attention at the Congress. On the contrary, the majority of sessions dealt with entirely other topics having little to do with the neoliberal intensification I highlight here. Yet this intensification was salient enough to be conspicuous throughout the event, as I describe in the following sections.

### **Intensifying Nature™ Inc.**

It should be noted that there is nothing conspiratorial in the WCC's promotion of Nature™ Inc.; a neoliberal agenda has been advocated quite openly by the IUCN leadership, as the quotation in this article's epigraph illustrates. MacDonald (2010a: 261) makes this point with respect to the 2008 WCC, describing “an explicit commit of the Secretariat, with the support of the Director General, for more intensified relationships with the private sector”. IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefevre reiterated this commitment at the 2012 Congress, stating in her introduction to a ‘Business and Ecosystems Think Tank’ session (in which various representatives of both the IUCN and WBCSD member companies delivered five-minute presentations showcasing their corporate social responsibility work):

When I was interviewing five years ago to consider becoming Director General of IUCN I asked a lot of questions of the interview group, including is IUCN

working with business. Because our mission says we're supposed to influence, engage, and assist societies throughout the world in using nature and natural resources in a sustainable and equitable manner and if business isn't a part of societies I wouldn't have wanted to be Director General. I was told 'yes' and so that's really one of the reasons—I wouldn't probably be with you today if IUCN wouldn't be engaging with business. (field notes, September 9, 2012).

What is most remarkable is how quickly this process of neoliberal intensification within the IUCN and other conservation organisations has progressed. MacDonald (2010a: 257-258) describes:

As recently as 2003, a plenary session at the World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa that included representatives from Shell Oil and the International Council on Mining and Minerals (ICMM) caused vocal protests from the participants, leading the Director General of IUCN, Achim Steiner, to have the audience microphones shut off, presumably in order to quell the protest. Supporters of 'Business and Biodiversity Initiatives' also confronted significant vocal opposition at the 2004 WCC in Bangkok, though this time it was tempered by the willingness of some IUCN members to allow the Secretariat to cautiously engage in discussions with the private sector.

MacDonald (2010a) states that this situation had changed dramatically by the 2008 WCC in Barcelona, where the IUCN Secretariat was openly advocating increased corporate participation in the meetings, going so far as to create a new category of participant—Partner—that did not exist prior. Numerous sessions showcased business initiatives undertaken by the IUCN and its corporate affiliates, many of these organised into a so-called 'Markets and Business Journey' directing participants from session to session. Finally, in a dramatic illustration of the turning of the tides, a motion to terminate the IUCN's growing partnership with Shell was defeated in the Members' Assembly, provoking Friends of the Earth International, one of the motion's main sponsors, to withdraw from the Union entirely.

Observing all of this, Christine MacDonald, author of *Green Inc.* (an indictment of growing business agendas within major conservation NGOs) summarised, "In Barcelona's conference rooms and banquet halls, the conversation centered on how environmental groups must become even more like corporations".<sup>6</sup> The strength of this neoliberal agenda was such that James Kantner, in *The New York Times* (cited in MacDonald 2010a: 256), encapsulated his impression of the Congress's general tenor with the tagline "Conservation has failed because it has not embraced the fundamental tenets of business management".

### Nature™ Inc. at the 2012 WCC

By the 2012 Congress, all of this had intensified still further. A neoliberal agenda was ostentatiously evident at the 2012

WCC from start to finish. The language of 'natural capital', 'ecosystem services', 'economic valuation', 'green growth' and the like was pervasive. Indeed, a neoliberal ideology was clearly inscribed in the Congress's very title. As IUCN Special Assistant to the Director General Xenya Cherny-Scanlon explained of the decision to adopt 'Nature+' as the WCC's official slogan, "We were working off a very comprehensive (read: long!) background document, full of scientific concepts and cryptic acronyms—REDD+, TEEB+, Rio+20.... And then I had a lightbulb moment—what our Congress is really about is nature+!"<sup>7</sup> All of these '+' acronyms inspiring the Nature+ slogan, of course, are part and parcel of the global neoliberal conservation agenda, and both REDD+ and TEEB were the focus of numerous sessions throughout the Congress. Motions endorsing REDD+, TEEB, and biodiversity offsets, another quintessential neoliberal conservation mechanism, were quickly passed in the Members' Assembly with no discussion whatsoever, and with almost 100% approval by both governmental and non-governmental chambers. Neoliberal advocacy at the 2012 WCC was such that one news article summarised the event with the title "IUCN Puts the Accent on Business", explaining, "The emphasis at the IUCN congress is on what big businesses can do to help achieve sustainable growth".<sup>8</sup>

The Nature™ Inc. agenda was most centrally illustrated by the prominence of the WBCSD at the Congress. Formed in the wake of the 1992 Rio Summit, the WBCSD describes itself as "a CEO-led organisation of forward-thinking companies that galvanises the global business community to create a sustainable future for business, society and the environment".<sup>9</sup> Its members comprise many of the world's largest and most influential corporations, including several in the extractive sector, whose activities have in the past garnered substantial criticism from environmentalists, such as Shell Oil, Rio Tinto, and Holcim, all of whom played prominent roles in the 2012 Congress. The WBCSD-IUCN partnership officially dates back to 2005, since which time the WBCSD has come to occupy a central role in WCC planning and execution. As one of the 2012 Congress's major sponsors, the WBCSD occupied the most visible pavilion at the entrance to the main meeting hall—the Business and Economics Pavilion—which hosted numerous presentation sessions and informal gatherings throughout the



Figure 3  
The Business and Economics Pavilion

event (Figure 3). The WBCSD logo was centrally displayed in the Members' Assembly auditorium as well. WBCSD President Peter Bakker was included in a World Leaders Dialogue on the theme of 'Green Growth', while Shell CEO Marvin Odum participated in a similar Dialogue discussing the curious question 'Nature+ and Climate: Can Nature Save Us?'

The case for business engagement was made in diverse ways by different actors throughout the Congress, but the most common argument was that policymakers and business executives only understand the language of 'economics', therefore conservationists must learn to speak this language if they want to exert influence in these important arenas. WBCSD President Bakker expressed this perspective quite clearly in introducing his organisation's Business and Ecosystems Think Tank (mainly an opportunity for various member companies to showcase their environmental stewardship in soundbite snippets), stating:

The language of biodiversity and ecosystems and service provision—all these words—it's incredibly difficult. Now I used to be a simple businessperson. Now I'm here. But there's a new language which is emerging, which is called 'natural capital'. For a businessperson that is much easier to understand; you have financial capital, you have social capital, and now you have natural capital. And so if you're a modern business leader, of course you manage for natural capital just as you would manage your financial capital. (field notes, September 8, 2012).

This point was made even more clearly by Craig Hanson, World Resource Institute's People and Ecosystems Program Director, in a similar presentation session also organised by WBCSD on 'Biodiversity and the Corporate Role'. Hanson asserted, "The more we can value nature in terms everyone understands—that would be economics—the more we can get everyone on board" (field notes, September 9, 2012).

### RESULTS: STRATEGIES OF ORCHESTRATION AT THE WCC

There was, of course, active and lively debate concerning the appropriateness of a neoliberal agenda and corporate partnership leading up to and throughout the 2012 WCC. Vague grumblings and less subtle dissent were heard in hallways and online exchanges—where one participant, indeed, called the IUCN a "corporate lapdog". The Congress's many events evidenced an enormous number of highly dedicated people working diligently to address the increasingly dire environmental issues faced by the world in myriad creative ways. What was surprising, however, was how little of this diversity and contestation penetrated the Congress's public spaces. In this way, an appearance of common agreement concerning the legitimacy and efficacy—indeed, the necessity—of neoliberal conservation was created, belying the continued presence of dissenting voices and alternative views. I call this dynamic 'orchestrating consent' to emphasise this performance of the *appearance* of agreement rather than the manufacture of

*actual* consent, highlighted by researchers in the tradition of Herman and Chomsky (1988), thus echoing Büscher et al.'s (2012: 18, emphasis in original) characterisation of neoliberal conservation in general as "consolidating the *appearance* of general consensus with the ideological assumptions of neoliberal capitalism". This orchestration was achieved by a variety of interrelated strategies, among which I have identified the following.

#### Staging consensus

Swyngedouw (2010: 226) observes that post-politics commonly mandates the staging of consensus as "one of the tactics through which spaces of conflict and antagonism are smoothed over and displaced". Consistent with this analysis, throughout the WCC the appearance of universal consensus around the embrace of a business agenda was reinforced by various techniques. It was clear that the Secretariat had decided in advance that the Congress would accomplish precisely this—as evidenced by the Nature+ slogan, the Director General's explicit endorsement of business engagement cited earlier, and numerous other examples—and the meeting was conducted in such a way to ensure that this result was achieved. Each morning in the Members' Assembly, discussion in the previous day's Forum events was synthesised and presented back to the audience as a representation, ostensibly, of the membership's collective will. With one exception (discussed in the following section), these syntheses emphasised common agreement around the need to 'scale up' market-based initiatives such as REDD+, TEEB, and valuation of natural capital in general. The Union's programme of action for the next four years, also ostensibly the product of collective deliberation, was also unveiled each morning, and Nature™ Inc. initiatives—called 'nature-based solutions' in the Congress's particular parlance—featured prominently throughout this as well.

A similar performance of collective agreement was staged in the Forum's closing session, where the Director General Marton-Lefevre repeatedly emphasised the decisions that "all" of "us" in the IUCN "family" had taken "together". In answering her own question of "why bother" holding a WCC at all, for instance, Marton-Lefevre affirmed:

The answer, I think, is without a doubt, found in the energy, the passion, and the commitment I have seen in all of you to find solutions, to adjust and improve approaches, to move to action—and yes indeed to build alliances.

Reflecting on the Congress's accomplishments she continued:

So the forum was not only a place for learning or exchanging experiences, it was also, this time more than ever, an occasion for the IUCN family, all of us—the Commissions, the Union, and the Secretariat—to present to each other the program of action we want to do together, as a huge alliance, for the next four years.

And again:

So together, we have set a baseline and a direction in which we want to go together, in the future. Together I believe we have marked emerging trends in conservation. Together we have shown the world that governments, businesses, NGOS, and media—many of them were here too—can indeed talk to each other and agree on what is needed for a sustainable future on our only one small planet. (field notes, September 12, 2012).

This staging of consensus, finally, was reflected in the so-called Jeju Declaration claiming to summarise the Congress's deliberations and the IUCN's vision for future action. Neoliberal rationality featured prominently in the Declaration, which asserted that "[v]aluing nature and ecosystem services is a critical first step towards providing benefits, payments and recognition to the custodians of nature" and vowed to "catalyze actions to demonstrate the potential role of a green economy in public policy and corporate behaviour at local, regional and global levels".<sup>10</sup> A first draft of the Declaration had, however, been circulated among key decision-makers before the Congress even began and its contents, ostensibly elaborated and revised throughout the meeting, were never presented or discussed within the Members' Assembly at all. Marton-Lefevre emphasised, in her closing statement, that this Declaration was intended merely to capture the 'spirit of the discussion' as interpreted by the Secretariat, and not to form a binding agreement or declaration similar to those commonly produced in UN climate change negotiations. However, as the only document emerging from the Congress seeking to encompass the programme as a whole, it could not help but convey an impression of collective agreement as well.

### Synchronising discourse

As noted above, the WCC should not be seen as an isolated event but a particular moment in a much larger process in which interests, agendas, and positions are discussed, presented, and negotiated over time. In this respect, one of the most striking things about the Congress was how closely aligned was the rhetoric and imagery employed by a wide range of participants. All of this conveyed the impression of a rigorous process of prior preparation to stage choreographed public performances and ensure that different actors' discourse was well synchronised, projecting a unified position concerning advancement of a neoliberal agenda.

For instance, the notion that it is important for conservationists to engage with business because almost three quarters of all economic activity in the world is managed by the private sector, and is therefore beyond the purview of either states or civil society, was reiterated in several venues—first by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Director Achim Steiner in the third World Leaders Forum, then by Pavan Sukhdev, investment banker and leader of the UNEP's TEEB initiative (MacDonald and Corson 2012), at an evening reception organised by Conservation International to showcase

its Global Conservation Fund initiative. A second oft-repeated theme was the need to bring both natural and social capital into business accounting to compensate for an overemphasis on financial capital in the past. This was stated several times in different fora in virtually identical language, by WBCSD President Bakker, by Global Environment Facility (GEF) CEO Naoko Ishii in the World Leaders Forum she shared with Bakker, and by Sukhdev, again, in a Forum session in the WBCSD pavilion devoted to the TEEB initiative. As Bakker explained:

I'm from business. That means—and I apologize—I'm a capitalist. But let me explain [to]you what a capitalist is. A capitalist is somebody who optimizes returns from capital. The mistake we've made in our economic model is that capitalists only optimize returns from financial capital... What we need to do, is we need two more elements of capital—natural capital and social capital—and tell the capitalists to go and optimize that... And that's going to be the way forward. (field notes, September 9, 2012).

In a third instance of synchronisation, Bakker, again, emphasised the urgency of a Nature<sup>TM</sup> Inc. agenda by asserting that "we" all "already know what needs to be done to address the environmental crisis". He continued, "So if the why, the what, and the when is figured out, there's only one question left to be answered, and I would really urge this whole conference to focus on that one question, which is: how are we going to do it? How are we going to implement solutions?" (field notes, September 8, 2012). Meanwhile, Marton-Lefevre, who had in fact participated in the same session in which Bakker made the above statement, employed remarkably similar language in her Forum closing, observing, "In the Forum discussion, time and time again, we were not talking about what to do, nor why, nor when, but instead about how to make nature count in economics, and in politics, and in our everyday lives" (field notes, September 12, 2012).

Indeed, the remarkable synchronicity of the Nature<sup>TM</sup> Inc. language employed by different participants was not lost on participants themselves. In the World Leaders Dialogue that Bakker shared with the UNEP Director Steiner, GEF CEO Ishii, Co-Chair of the South Korean government's Committee on Green Growth Soogli Young, and others, for instance, Bakker remarked, "If I listen to this panel, we're all kind of saying the same things. Different levels of urgency, but we'll all talking the same language" (field notes, September 9, 2012). In her closing address, similarly, Marton-Lefevre stated as one of her main lessons of the Congress, "We also witnessed how biodiversity and businesses are learning to talk each other's languages, as reflected in the increasingly popular concept of 'natural capital'" (September 9, 2012).

### Expanding alliances

The 2012 WCC was also remarkable for the complex interconnections among key participants, signaling a dramatic expansion in the extent and depth of alliances forged by those promoting a neoliberal agenda. This was facilitated, clearly,

by institutionalisation of the ‘Partners’ category following the 2008 WCC, allowing corporate sponsors to exercise unprecedented influence over Congress proceedings both before and during the event. This of course reflects a more general increase in corporate influence over the conservation movement as a whole in recent years (Chapin 2004; Corson 2010; MacDonald 2010b).

In one example of this alliance expansion, a ‘workshop’ organised by WBCSD at its Economics and Business Pavilion called “Taking the Ecosystem Challenge” featured representatives from Shell, Rio Tinto, Mondi, Hitachi, Puma, Weyerhaeuser, the IUCN’s Asia office, and the South Korean branch of the WBCSD showcasing their organisations’ good works, as a Business Council employee MCed. A second forum held the next day, the Business and Ecosystems Think Tank (described earlier), featured all of these same people in addition to the WBCSD’s current and past Presidents and the IUCN’s Director General and Chief Economist. At the third World Leaders Dialogue the following day, the WBCSD President was again present, along with UNEP Director Steiner and GEF CEO Ishii. At a CI-sponsored reception later that evening, Ishii again appeared along with TEEB leader Sukhdev, CI President Russell Mittermeier, and former President of Guyana Bharrat Jagdeo, celebrated for his enthusiastic embrace of the REDD+ initiative. Jagdeo had also been included in the first World Leaders Forum along with Shell CEO Odum and Holcim Head of Sustainable Development Ruksana Mirza. Meanwhile, at a ‘Biodiversity Offsets Workshop’ also held in the WBCSD pavilion, representatives from IUCN, CI, and Rio Tinto were joined by NatureServe, a Washington, DC-based NGO, as well as The Biodiversity Consultancy, a private firm brokering biodiversity offsets. Later that same day, a presentation session on ‘Biodiversity and the Corporate Role’ featured representatives from WBCSD, World Resource Institute, and USAID, as well as The Nature Conservancy and Dow Chemical showcasing their growing partnership, and Samsung, one of the Congress’s primary sponsors, promoting its own partnership with the World Wildlife Fund. Alcoa, Dell, Duke Energy, Weyerhaeuser, Kimberley-Clark, Hitachi, and Coca-Cola were also represented.

### **Disciplining dissent**

Büscher et al. (2012), as noted earlier, contend that one of neoliberal conservation’s key strategies has been an aggressive disciplining and suppression of oppositional views (see also Igoe et al. 2010). Such disciplining was evident at the 2012 WCC in several different forms. It was inscribed, first, in the very (infra) structure of the meeting. As is clear from the description provided earlier, the sheer scale of the event made it rather intimidating, with an intervention in the Members’ Assembly, in particular, requiring a highly visible presence before an audience of over five thousand. On the other hand, the highly fragmented nature of the rest of the Congress restricted space for public contestation still further. Multiple simultaneous sessions organised into separate ‘journeys’ meant

that participants were relatively segregated from one another, channeled into sessions with like-minded colleagues and largely isolated from those holding differing points of view (MacDonald 2010a).<sup>11</sup> This was reinforced by the fact that the meeting programme listed sessions only by title and sponsor organisation, providing no information concerning individual presentations or presenters (MacDonald 2010a).

Numerous other features of meeting structure inhibited open debate as well. MacDonald (2010a) relates that “the artifacts of meeting—the use of PowerPoint technology, the arrangement of seats in a room, the format within which interaction is structured, the actions of a Chair—can act to control the circulation and reception of information” (2010a: 264). In addition to all of this, most sessions offered limited time and space for questions and answers following formal presentations, and even this space was tightly constrained by the Chairs’ role in selecting respondents. In an even more tightly constrained space of interaction, in the Business and Ecosystems Think Tank, members of the audience were given several sheets of colored paper and asked to hold them up in response to a predetermined series of questions prepared by the Chair. In the World Leaders Forums, it was impossible to pose questions to the participants directly; instead, audience members were invited to submit questions online, after which they were projected onto a large screen behind the panel and sample questions selected for direction to the panel members by the session’s moderator.

As MacDonald (2010a: 268) observes of the 2008 WCC, even in the 2012 WCC, expression of dissent was inhibited by the “meeting culture” dominating the event, which prescribed measured politeness and “the exercise of self-control and self-discipline” on the part of participants and thus limited their ability to engage in vocal contestation. This culture of restrained politeness was also evident in one of the few moments when the orchestrated consensus around a neoliberal agenda was challenged in the full Members’ Assembly. During the third sitting of the Assembly, a representative of the Commission on Environment, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP), summarising the previous day’s events addressing the theme ‘Green Growth: Myth or Reality’, opened by stating, “The first key point is that macroeconomic policies need to be redesigned for social and environmental sustainability. And the subtext here is that there’s a need to reverse the neoliberal project of commodification, privatisation, and financialisation of nature”. This point, which in fact directly contradicted much of the neoliberal advocacy in the previous day’s discussion, including most of the World Leaders Dialogue, was met with complete silence. The speaker continued, mentioning several other issues before again stating:

It’s very important not to have a one-size-fits-all approach to the valuation of nature, or ecosystem functions, services, and [inaudible]. It has to be culturally and gender sensitive, and open to the inclusion of other values than purely monetary values—cultural, spiritual, use values rather than exchange values. (field notes, September 10, 2012).

Again, this was not by any stretch of the imagination an accurate summary of the general tenor of the discussions in question. In fact, critique of neoliberalisation and financialisation had been explicitly advanced in only one presentation session, also organised by the CEESP, titled 'Economic Policy Reform and Sustainability at a Time of Crisis' and attended by approximately 40 people, in which several of the speakers did in fact specifically identify the neoliberal capitalist system as one of the primary drivers of the environmental crisis, describing in great detail the logic by which a system predicated on continual growth precludes sustainability. The fairly radical dissent voiced in this session, however, was largely disciplined by the vast majority of attendees simply ignoring it. Yet this second statement, again, was met with silence, and the overarching presentation followed by light applause after which the Assembly turned to other matters with no further mention of the highly controversial issues that had just been raised. In this way, dissent concerning the neoliberal 'consensus', even when explicitly voiced, was unable to penetrate the Congress's public discussion.

Dissent was also disciplined by the frequent admonition that the urgency of ecological degradation—phrases such as 'exceeding planetary boundaries' and 'facing a biodiversity extinction crisis' were common—is such that there is no longer time to engage in debate and critique (see Swyngedouw 2010 for discussion of this dynamic within environmental post-politics in general). Instead, the need for immediate action—a focus on 'solutions' over problems and issues of responsibility or blame—demanded that difference be put aside and a common agenda pursued. As WBCSD President Bakker stated this case in the World Leaders Dialogue:

From my point of view that needs urgent collaboration at all fronts—between NGOs and business, between governments and business, between science and business.... We all know why we are here. We all know what we need to do. We certainly know when we need to do it which is *now*. We're running out of time. (field notes, September 9, 2012).

When asked by the moderator to respond to a question raised by an audience member—"The reality is that today's economy is driven by profit-seeking, cost externalising corporations. Can we trust them to deliver tomorrow's green economy?"—Bakker reiterated, "If we're gonna have this debate based on skepticism we're never gonna come to a finish line. We need to seek collaboration, we need to reach out and work based on trust".

### Appropriating 'radical'

Advancement of a neoliberal agenda at the WCC was also facilitated by its framing as a novel, transformative, even revolutionary challenge to the status quo in both conservation and business policy. Again, the WBCSD is paradigmatic here, for despite its inclusion of some

of the most entrenched multinationals in the world, the organisation has worked hard for some time to frame itself as a 'radical' challenge to 'business as usual'. In its celebrated *Vision 2050* report, for instance, the WBCSD admits of its proposal for restructuring the global economy so that 9 billion people may "live well" within "the limits of the planet", "At first this Vision may read like a utopian ideal, considering how far it seems to be from the world of today" (WBCSD 2010: i). Yet the WBCSD insists that "the world already has the knowledge, science, technologies, skills and financial resources needed to achieve *Vision 2050*" (WBCSD 2010: ii). What is required to realise this vision, however, is "[a] radical new landscape for business", one in which "[b]usiness leaders will need to manage companies through unprecedented transformational change" (WBCSD 2010: ii).

This perspective was repeatedly reinforced by Bakker at the 2012 WCC, where he opened the Business and Ecosystems Think Tank by asserting, "Business as usual is no longer sustainable; we need to radically transform the way we run our planet" (September 8, 2012). His contribution to the next day's World Leaders Forum, meanwhile, was peppered with similar statements:

So it's absolutely necessary that we're going to decouple growth from material consumption, from ecosystem degradation. But what I kind of miss in the debate so far is the level of radical transformation that that is going to require. Because this is not going to be the story of incremental change, this is radically revolutionizing almost everything we do.

But my big point is not the incremental change—let's build another windmill or another solar panel—we're not gonna get there fast enough. We need a revolution, we need radical transformation, and we need to start it now. And if you look into the theory of radical transformations, we'll need courageous leaders to do that—on the government front, on the business front, even on the NGO front.

Since we're here to be radical, we're gonna put natural and social capital into the accounting rules for business, and that way drive the performance of business in a balance between financial, natural, and social capital. (field notes, September 9, 2012).

If Bakker's is a radical vision, it is, as Brockington (2012) describes of the UNEP's (2011) *Towards a green economy* report, a "radically conservative" one, firmly reinforcing the very dynamics—capital accumulation, monetary valuation—against which self-proclaimed radical movements commonly mobilised in the past. Swyngedouw (2010: 219) describes a similar dynamic with respect to environmental post-politics in general, paraphrasing the logic of this position as asserting that "we have to change radically, but within the contours of the existing state of the situation... so that nothing really has to change".

## Cynical reasoning

All of the above was reinforced by what MacDonald (2013), following Sloterdijk (1988), calls the rise of “cynical reason” within contemporary conservation discourse. As Sloterdijk observed, cynical reason is difficult to contest since it is “already reflexively buffered” (Huyssen 1994: 160, in MacDonald 2013: 50) by self-conscious awareness of the contradictions in one’s ideology. As Žižek (1989: 29) explains, in exercising cynical reason actors “know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it”. Such cynical reflexivity, MacDonald contends,

increasingly echoes in the plenary rooms of organized conservation events as cynical organizational leaders speak of common goals, or refer to ‘we environmentalists’, even as their current and former employees talk of how their own organizations are divided into resource-centered units responsible for securing their own funding and an organizational ‘climate’ in which units do not speak to each other for fear of compromising access to a funding source (2013: 53).

This dynamic was indeed evidenced in the 2012 WCC in cynical, if not sarcastic, reference to the historic sense of opposition between business and environmentalism that the event was, in that very moment, working aggressively to dismantle. Recall, for instance, Bakker’s caveat at the beginning of his contribution to the World Leaders Dialogue: “I’m from business. That means—and I apologize—I’m a capitalist”. In a similar spirit, Pavan comments on his approach to environmental policy, writing:

As an investment banker with another life built over fifteen years around my passion for the economics of nature and, more recently, by leading TEEB, a study on the economics of ecosystems and biodiversity, I am often asked how I reconcile my capitalist background with my commitments to nature and the environment. I give my stock reply ‘I don’t reconcile them—I am a total capitalist’.<sup>12</sup>

In preemptively addressing potential critique of their cynical motivation through reflexive acknowledgement—even assertive defense—of this very cynicism, organisational leaders effectively short-circuit opposition before it even coalesces.

## DISCUSSION: CRACKS IN THE MIRROR

As Swyngedouw (2010: 226) describes of environmental post-politics in general, through strategies such as these, “[p]roper political choice as the agonistic confrontation of competing visions of a different socio-ecological order is foreclosed as the space of the political, or sutured by totalising threats that permit only one choice or direction, one that can be ‘managed’ through dialogical consensual practices”. Yet while these strategies were widespread and effective in orchestrating the appearance of consensus around advancement of a neoliberal

agenda at the WCC, the gaps in the logic informing this agenda were so abundant that it is difficult to discern where to begin dissecting them. Let us start with the common assertion, iterated by Bakker and Hanson, of the importance of discussing biodiversity in terms of economics since this is a language ‘everyone understands’. The language of economics, of course, is far from universal. On the contrary, it is spoken by only a very small segment of humanity, for it requires many years of esoteric education to become proficient in, and contains as least as much specialised terminology as the language of ‘biodiversity’ and ‘ecosystems’ that Bakker claims to have such difficulty comprehending (not to mention that the concept of ‘ecosystem services’ he mentions in this same spirit, represents precisely the translation of conservation into economic terms that he advocates [Robertson 2006; Sullivan 2009, 2013a]). Compounding this positing of economics as a universal language is the conflation of neoliberal, free market policy—a very particular perspective totally marginal to mainstream economic theory until thirty years ago (Peck 2010)—with economics in general (see Büscher et al. 2012).

A second issue concerns the common practice of positing a strict distinction among three realms of society, as when Bakker calls for “urgent collaboration at all fronts—between NGOs and business, between governments and business” and so forth. As MacDonald (2013: 57) notes, this imagery “reproduces the fallacy of clear and distinct boundaries between these actors—business, NGOs and government—when in practice these have long been diffuse and permeable as actors, interests and logics have flowed through them”. The sense of opposition between business and conservation propagated in such statements also eludes the reality that in fact conservation has been an important component of capitalist accumulation for some time now (Brockington et al. 2008).

The frequently reiterated argument for the importance of engaging with businesses since they control 75% of the global economy is equally problematic. After all, this situation, to the extent that it is true, is not a natural, neutral phenomenon but the direct result of 30 years of neoliberal restructuring that has progressively downsized states around the world, privatising institutions and assets as a strategy of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005). An equally viable response to this situation, therefore, would be to advocate for a rejuvenated role for the state in directly managing economic affairs. Bakker’s assertion, moreover, that good capitalists “optimize returns from financial capital”, and therefore should be conceded leadership in doing the same with respect to social and natural capital, belies the fact that the current economic crisis, which has exacerbated poverty for much of the world’s population and severely restricted funding for environmental initiatives, was precipitated precisely by capitalists ostensibly optimising their capital. Notwithstanding this reality, the Congress, indeed, evidenced a complete lack of mention—in any of the sessions devoted to business and economics, the opening and closing sessions, the daily summaries of past discussions and future programming, or the Jeju Declaration—of the impact of the continued economic crisis on all of this

optimistic assessment of the future potential of market-based conservation.

Then there is the common extension of the capital concept from financial to ‘natural’ and ‘social’ realms (which Sukhdev calls a “three dimensional capitalism”<sup>13</sup>) to consider. Bakker, earlier, framed this as common sense, even ‘natural’ equivalency (“you have financial capital, you have social capital, and now you have natural capital”). Sukhdev takes this claim further, contending that this “actually is not a new thought. It goes right back to Adam Smith’s concepts of ‘land, labour and capital’”.<sup>14</sup> Yet this equation is far less straightforward than either of these men acknowledge. Polanyi (1944: 187) called the appropriation of land as commodity “perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors”. And the conception of ‘social capital’ advanced in these visions appears far removed from initial formulations of the term by Bourdieu (1977) and others who have extended the concept into the realms of development and natural resource management. As Wilshusen (2014) contends, Bourdieu in fact intended precisely to contest the commodification of human relations advocated by Bakker, Sukhdev, and colleagues in his advancement of the social capital concept. Compounding all of this are the disturbing implications of reducing a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted world valued in many different ways in diverse cultural systems to the one dimensional measure of ‘natural capital’ (Robertson 2006; Sullivan 2009).

Many more issues of this ilk could be raised. The point is that the Congress’s orchestration was such that none of these issues could be discussed in a way that would garner earnest, genuine response or engagement. In this way, gaps in the neoliberal logic propagated through the WCC remained concealed, and the appearance of a coherent consensus sustained.

## CONCLUSION

Žižek writes,

In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...)... via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus emphasizes the need to leave old ideological visions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people’s concrete needs and demands into account (1999: 198).

In this article, I have detailed how this dynamic unfolded at the 2012 WCC, resulting, as Swyngedouw (2010: 227) describes, in “the formation of a particular regime of environmental governance that revolves around consensus, agreement, participatory negotiation of different interests and technocratic expert management in the context of a non-disputed management of market-based socio-economic organization”. Discussion of conservation policy and practice at the WCC, in short, has become increasingly post-political.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, as noted in the introduction, we stand at a pivotal moment in the history of global conservation, one in which an agenda concerned with harnessing conservation in the interest of capital accumulation, long present as an element of environmental policy (Brockington et al. 2008), is on the brink of becoming the central organising principle of the mainstream conservation movement (Sullivan 2013a). As the world’s “largest and most important conservation event”, the WCC could constitute a vital arena wherein the necessity, legitimacy, and efficacy of this neoliberal agenda continues to be assessed and discussed, based on the type of rigorous, evidence-based evaluation of past performance and future prospects that the IUCN claims is one of its main sources of value to policymakers. The space in which such work could occur, however, is rapidly diminishing, as the preceding analysis makes glaringly clear, with processes of debate and dissensus essential to democratic decision-making (Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2006) increasingly superseded by post-political tactics of orchestration and consensus-formation. Indeed, if past trends are a reliable guide, by the 2016 WCC—or indeed, even by the 2014 World Parks Congress, also organised by IUCN, that precedes it—this space may be closed altogether and a post-political neoliberal agenda firmly entrenched within the doxa of both organisation and events. By highlighting the ways in which this process of neoliberal intensification is occurring, and the strategies through which an ostensive post-political consensus around its advancement has been orchestrated, this article seeks to help preserve an opening for the continued voicing of ‘displaced and disobedient’ views (Igoe et al. 2010).

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## NOTES

1. This literature has grown such that it would require too much space to list all relevant sources here. Key collections and synthetic texts include Igoe and Brockington 2007; Brockington et al. 2008; Brockington and Duffy 2010; Igoe et al. 2010; Arsel and Büscher 2012; Büscher et al. 2012; Fairhead et al. 2012; Roth and Dressler 2012; Corson et al. 2013; and Büscher et al. 2014.
2. Following Nealon (2008: 32, emphasis in original), I use the term intensification in the Foucaultian sense to designate a phenomenon’s “increasing *efficiency* in a system, coupled with increasing *saturation*”. Efficiency in this understanding refers to power’s work to “increase its effects while diminishing its economic cost... and political cost” (Foucault 1977: 80–81, in Nealon 2008: 32), while saturation highlights the fact that “as power intensifies, the potential regions of its application become less rigidly predefined”, offering “increased opportunities for the practices of power to saturate larger and

- larger sectors of the socius” (Nealon 2008: 32–33).
3. An initiative spearheaded by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in an explicitly neoliberal vein (MacDonald and Corson 2012).
4. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the relevance of this analytical frame.
5. [http://www.iucn.org/knowledge/news/newsletters/cmcs/september\\_2012\\_v3.cfm](http://www.iucn.org/knowledge/news/newsletters/cmcs/september_2012_v3.cfm). Accessed on April 16, 2013.
6. <https://www.adbusters.org/magazine/81/environment.html>. Accessed on September 12, 2012.
7. <http://portals.iucn.org/blog/2012/09/11/how-nature-was-born/>. Accessed on September 12, 2012.
8. <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/09/iucn-puts-the-accent-on-business/>. Accessed on April 16, 2013.
9. <http://www.wbcsc.org/about.aspx>. Accessed on April 16, 2013. The organisation was “initiated by Maurice Strong, as the Secretary General for the 1992 Earth Summit (and previously for the 1972 UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment), but originally an entrepreneur in the Alberta oil patch and president of the Power Corporation of Canada” (Sullivan 2013b). From the outset, the WBCSD has sought to “apply the basic principles of business” to environmental governance by “running ‘Earth Incorporated’ with a depreciation, amortization and maintenance account” (cited in Sullivan 2013b).
10. [http://iucnworldconservationcongress.org/news\\_press/?11090/Towards-a-New-Era-of-Conservation-Sustainability-and-Nature-based-Solutions](http://iucnworldconservationcongress.org/news_press/?11090/Towards-a-New-Era-of-Conservation-Sustainability-and-Nature-based-Solutions). Accessed on April 16, 2013.
11. ‘Journeys’ offer a list of similar-themed sessions for participants to attend, but do not force participants to do so.
12. <http://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/know-how/three-dimensional-capitalism>. Accessed on April 16, 2013.
13. <http://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/know-how/three-dimensional-capitalism>. Accessed on April 16, 2013.
14. <http://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/know-how/three-dimensional-capitalism>. Accessed on April 16, 2013.
15. An important question for future research, raised by an insightful reviewer, concerns the reasons why the WCC seems particularly conducive for the orchestration of Nature™ Inc. relative to other events, such as the Rio +20 Summit, where open dissent from a neoliberal agenda was much more prevalent (Goodman and Salleh 2013). Comparative meta-analysis of research conducted at the different events could provide valuable insights into this dynamic.

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