Reframing conservation and development perspectives on bushmeat*

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1. Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is drawing new attention to the ‘bushmeat crisis’, a term first coined by conservationists to describe the unsustainable consumption of wildlife across the Global South (Robinson and Bennett 2002). As the pandemic’s origins are traced to zoonotic transmission, with bats and pangolins the primary reservoirs for a wide variety of coronaviruses, the continued trade and consumption of bushmeat appears to pose an untenable risk to global public health. The fatal consequences of human-wildlife contact have intensified existing concerns for the degradation of natural ecosystems, spurring calls for wholesale bans on the wildlife trade and increasing scrutiny of urban ‘wet markets’ (Koh et al 2002).

Conservation and development initiatives have also long promoted alternative livelihoods to reduce hunting activities and introduced alternative protein sources as bushmeat substitutes (Wicander and Coad 2018). This crisis narrative, however, obscures the values that drive these interventions by conservation and development actors. The bushmeat crisis is frequently framed through the juxtaposition of global consequences against local actions, the industrialized foodways of the developed world against the practices and preferences of the developing, and rural peoples against urban consumers. However, these binary oppositions often stem from the particular cultural and environmental values of policymakers themselves. We examine these juxtapositions to demonstrate how bushmeat interventions tend to prioritize the interests of those far from the sites of consumption, while promoting development pathways that emphasize a dichotomy between humans and wildlife. In reimagining bushmeat governance, the integration of local value orientations to bushmeat is critical (cf van Vliet 2018). This includes consideration of a broad continuum of practices, running from rural hunters meeting needs for food and cash—which raises concerns over biodiversity loss—to urban consumers with a cultivated taste for bushmeat—which raises concerns over zoonotic transmissions. At the same time, policymakers must critically reflect on their own conceptions of wildlife, food, and rural development, such that the blame and burden of crisis resolution are not placed on already marginalized peoples.

1.1. Part one: global and local

Interventions targeting bushmeat trade and consumption often purport to act in service of ‘global’ priorities, whether it be ‘global public health’ or species and ecosystems of ‘global conservation interest’. Despite its apparent inclusiveness, however, this phrasing often reflects the Global North’s priorities, especially when local and developing country interests are not represented in national and international policy forums (Roe et al 2020). For instance, serious zoonotic diseases that have long been endemic across the Global South, but which do not threaten
‘global’ health, remain under-addressed (i.e. rabies, leishmaniasis, echinococcosis, etc). Similarly, concerns for species loss in the name of global biodiversity often ignore the interests of local communities in these same resources (Cawthorn and Hoffman 2015), and decisions made to regulate the international wildlife trade are influenced by powerful Western NGOs (Challender et al 2015).

Global, prescriptive conservation policies and actions to ban the wildlife trade and promote animal husbandry may not reduce the risk of future pandemics or prevent biodiversity loss, and may even have the inverse effect. Closing bushmeat markets will not necessarily transform the dynamics of the global trade (Milner-Gulland et al 2003) and may only drive the trade underground. Interventions to increase local incomes and food security are often premised on an inverse relationship between economic status and bushmeat consumption, yet studies have shown that bushmeat consumption is often linked to elevated social status (i.e. Friant et al 2020). The global supply and demand for bushmeat must be understood in light of the complexity of behavior driven by livelihood needs, cultural beliefs, and the distance between where food is sourced and where it is sold.

The widespread concern regarding wildlife trade is not misplaced (Borzée et al 2020), but too often, calls for bushmeat bans oblige the most economically insecure to shoulder a disproportionate responsibility for change (Roe et al 2020). Rather than accepting the representation of ‘global values’ presented by conservationists and policymakers at face value, a greater effort is needed to center the local within the global, incorporating collaborations between social scientists, conservationists, local communities and policymakers.

1.2. Part two: developed and developing
Cultural and developmentalist conceptions of what foods are appropriate for consumption and what modes of food production are acceptable inform bushmeat policies across the Global South. Conservation and development organizations have sought to reduce pressures on wildlife species through the introduction of alternative food sources and production systems. In keeping with the rise of industrialized meat production in the 20th century (Espinosa et al 2020), Western conservation and development organizations have often promoted raising farm animals like pigs and goats, or farming wildlife like cane rats and duikers, to replace hunting of traditionally-consumed game (figure 1) (Wicander and Coad 2018). However, bushmeat and associated hunting practices remain central for many cultures, and indigenous groups have defended their importance for food sovereignty, cultural identities, and the character of their diets (van Vliet 2018).

Whereas industrialized meat production is based on notions of developmental progress and modernizing livelihoods, industrial practices have increased the scale of disease spread, the immunosuppression of industrially farmed animals, and, notably, the risks of zoonotic transmission on factory farms (Espinosa et al 2020). Industrial meat production also has other environmental impacts: disposal of animal waste results in air, water, and soil pollution, and agricultural intensification to produce livestock feed leads to widespread soil erosion and destruction of natural ecosystems (Kraham 2017). In comparison, local hunting practices may indeed be far more conservative of natural ecosystems, although the introduction of new hunting technologies and marketing methods in rural areas have intensified hunting impacts on target species (i.e. Bowler et al 2020). In the Congo Basin, for instance, the replacement of bushmeat with locally-raised cattle would require the transformation of 25 million hectares of natural forest into pastures (Nasi et al 2011). Moreover, programs that promote the rearing of domesticated animals and farmed wildlife have been challenged by the difficulties of transforming hunters into farmers, lack of rural access to market centers, and lack of market demand for introduced meats (Wicander and Coad 2018).

The proposition that ‘development’ will enable the achievement of environmental conservation goals has long informed interventions in resource-dependent communities of the Global South. Proposed development trajectories further equate marketization and industrialization with progress, without adequate reflection of the cultural particularity and the social and environmental failures of these models. In the wake of such developmentalist imaginaries, hunting and bushmeat consumption are often denigrated as backwards and environmentally destructive, a critique that the ‘modern’ agro-industrial practices of the Global North, despite their scale and impact, are often spared. Finally, while increasing demand for bushmeat from new and external consumers has heightened pressures on wildlife populations, conservation and development interventions continue to target rural hunting and consumption in ways that fail to consider these regional and international influences on local practices.

1.3. Part three: rural and urban
Debates often conflate the very different cases of bushmeat consumed locally and bushmeat consumed in distant urban markets. The urban marketing of bushmeat from rural areas involves very different dimensions of time, space, and proximity: game hunted by local peoples is typically butchered on the spot and cooked and eaten shortly thereafter; it is not

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5 Bushmeat consumption is invariably racialized as a practice of non-Western peoples, or indeed presented as a practice that underscores the cultural—if not developmental—differences between those who consume such ‘exotic’ foods and those who do not.
live-caged and sent to distant markets for slaughter and consumption in a very different environment, often at a much later date (figure 2). The butchering of bushmeat involves risk of zoonotic transmission regardless of setting (Friant et al. 2015). However, whereas a traditional hunt may bring together just a single species of game and a handful of people, the urban marketing of bushmeat places into proximity multiple species of game and a succession of different middlemen, marketers, processors, and consumers,
in much more congested spaces, for much longer periods of time (cf the fine-grained study of human-animal ‘contact’ by Narat et al 2017).

The differences between urban and rural make bushmeat into a valuable but also problematic commodity. Bushmeat markets develop at the ever-moving boundary between urban and rural, at the vanishing point where more natural landscapes become more cultural ones, where the pressures of commercialization and globalization impinge on rural environments and resources. The same set of socio-cultural developments drive both deforestation and the bushmeat market; forest clearance and migration to urban areas co-develop with bushmeat markets. Bushmeat markets are not a new thing in world history, but there has been a dramatic change in their magnitude as development around the globe has reconfigured rural–urban boundaries. Modern infrastructure, involving markets, finance, and transport—road-building in particular—has extended the reach of urban consumers deep into tropical and subtropical forests, fundamentally changing the speed and magnitude of the bushmeat trade to distant urban areas (Laurance and Arrea 2017).

Bushmeat markets thrive in the modern world because many newly urbanized peoples around the world continue to look to rural areas as the source of health-giving foods. However, the fine-grained knowledge of the local ecosystem from which these products come is typically lost along the rural-to-urban commodity chain. In many regions of the world, local hunting practices have been regulated by centuries, even millennia, of trial-and-error. However, these time-tested customs of human-nonhuman interaction and consumption, often enforced by local taboos (Golden and Comaroff 2015), typically do not travel with bushmeat to distant urban markets, where often completely new practices of interaction and consumption have been developed.

Urban bushmeat markets are a paradox of modernity: the very ability of modernity to bring these disparate places and ecosystems together is the problem (Appadurai 1996). And it is the complex feelings of urbanizing peoples toward urban and rural environments that continues to drive this linkage in the first place.

2. Conclusion

In this paper, we examine the normative values that underlie conservation and development interventions in the ‘bushmeat crisis’. The very framing of ‘crisis’, in terms that implicitly oppose global priorities to local behaviors, naturalizes the preferences and practices of the developed world to those of the developing, problematizes rural versus urban populations, and privileges the interests and values of the Global North. The validity of concerns for biodiversity and public health cannot be denied, but these concerns should not lead to marginalizing the interests of those dependent on bushmeat consumption and trade. Decolonizing this debate involves incorporation of the practices, knowledge, and voices in the Global South. The characterization of Northern priorities as ‘global’ ignores the fact that the ‘local’ may comprise sizeable rural populations spread throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, for whom bushmeat is a critical source of protein and income. Development interventions to reduce the bushmeat trade must address Northern biases against the consumption of the unfamiliar (Zhan 2005), and must equally address the environmental consequences of Northern systems of industrialized meat production.

Bushmeat consumption and trade are geographically and conceptually distant from the policy-making centers of Europe and North America. In consequence, successful bushmeat policy requires policymakers in the Global North to examine their own values and perspectives on wildlife, the nature of food, and development trajectories. This valuable complexity will allow for more robust and equitable bushmeat policies, which have significant impacts for the foodscape, livelihoods, and environments of current and future generations.

Data availability statement

All data that support the findings of this study are included within the article (and any supplementary files).

The authors have confirmed that any identifiable participants in this study have given their consent for publication.

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