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Park Morality: Social and political negotiations in the Abel Tasman National Park (Aotearoa New Zealand)

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Drawing on the diverse field of political ecology and the 'orders of worth' framework of pragmatic sociology, this thesis investigates the relationship between politics and morality in the negotiations that surround the efforts to ecologically restore the Abel Tasman National park of Aotearoa New Zealand. To do this, this study utilized qualitative research methods to explore the development of conservation partnerships (between philanthropic environmental trusts and the Department of Conservation) in order to establish the implication of these interactions for the management of this park, as well as identify the explicit and implicit moralities embedded within this process. Here the wider aim of this enquiry was to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between politics and morality in biodiversity conservation and establish the role that these elements play in shaping park management.

As results show, the intervention of philanthropic environmental trusts has led to a rearrangement of power relations and consequently opened up further space to negotiate the specific practices of conservation. For certain actors, conservation partnerships are seen as an opportunity to reform the organisation and approach of the Department of conservation, mainly through the transferal of logics and practices utilized in the private sector. In a practical sense, this shift can be seen to subtly influence and alter the development of specific conservation priorities, the practices undertaken, the technologies used, and the methodologies employed. That is not to say that these rearrangements indicate a significant departure from the broad conservation aims set out by the Department of Conservation, but rather signifies a re-negotiation of the conservation details. While the scope of these negotiations primarily focused on the technical details and processes of ecological restoration, the emergence of practical complications and areas of conflict within individual projects revealed that these debates should not be considered free of ideological or normative content. The specific ideological and moral foundations that actors utilised to justify perspectives within the process of establishing agreement on an appropriate course of action, revealed a shift, whereby the imperatives of productivity, effectiveness, cost-efficiency, and activating network capacities has become increasingly significant within the 'regimes of justification' that surrounds this park. Situating the finding of this thesis in a wider context, this inquiry can be seen to further emphasizes the necessity of exploring the role that moralities play in conservation debates and incorporating these elements into the political analysis of park management. In particular, as was shown here, moralities could be seen to play an important role in strengthening and fortifying dominant preservationist ideals and neoliberal narratives in this situation.

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