ABSTRACT

Conversion from livestock and/or crop farming to game farming has been a notable trend on privately owned land in South Africa over the last decades. This change has been characterised by the fast growth of wildlife ranching, reflected in the annual increase in land enclosed by game fences and the high demand for wildlife which is being traded privately and at wildlife auctions. Key environmental and agricultural legislation has been passed since 1994 that impacts the wildlife sector, for instance, legislation on property rights, (re)distribution of resources, and biodiversity conservation in South Africa. The study sought to investigate the extent to which the state is able to impose effective controls over land use activities related to wildlife conservation on private land, and to explore in detail how governance processes actually work on the ground in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The study explores how the private game farming industry positions itself with respect to existing agricultural and environmental regulations, as well as how the state is responding to the challenge of competing needs over land and wildlife resources that is posed by the game farming sector. The basis of the study was to unravel findings that show interactions, discourses, policy positions, and power relations of stakeholders in the governance of game farming.

Realising the importance of the link between environmental governance and institutions, the thesis uses the idea of institutional bricolage by Frances Cleaver to explore the governance of private game farms through various institutional arrangements. Cleaver contends that formal institutions created through abstract principles are not the primary means through which tensions inherent in the use of natural resources are resolved. Greater focus was therefore placed on how rules, norms and shared strategies get stitched together through repetitive interactions by actors involved in game ranching. Critical realism was the guiding ontological philosophy for this study.

Data was obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants from major stakeholder organisations and communities linked to the private wildlife sector in KwaZulu-Natal province. I also collected data through visits to game farms and private wildlife reserves, and acted as an observer at game auctions, workshops and conferences. Documentary evidence collected also served as primary data. Critical discourse analysis (which in this study also incorporates political discourse analysis) was the major analytical framework.

Evidence presented in this study points towards the fractured state in the governance of the private game farming sector. The state is not a homogeneous and monolithic entity uniformly applying itself to the regulation of the sector. There is no clear direction on the position of private game farming at the interface of environmental and agricultural regulations. The state lacks a clear vision for the South African countryside as shown by the outstanding land restitution and labour tenant claims on privately owned land earmarked for wildlife production. Instead, role players in the game farming sector are using the available governance arrangements to position themselves strategically for their own benefit, even though some of their activities cause tension.

In that process, the private wildlife industry has completely changed the landscape of nature conservation in South Africa. In KwaZulu-Natal the long standing cordial relations between conservation authorities and private landowners have worked to the advantage of the private landowners. The study argues that this transformation of the institutional processes mediating the governance of the private game farming sector has been a long and enduring arrangement emerging organically over time. Changes in the regulatory regime through new laws, amendment of existing laws and unbalanced implementation of existing laws creates an environment of considerable uncertainty for the game farmers who are the major role players in the wildlife sector, yet within this context private landowners do retain significant space for manoeuvre.
Keywords: environmental governance; institutions; regulatory environment; institutional bricolage; wildlife ranching; private game farming; biodiversity conservation; the fractured state; Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife; KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa