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Political ecology of private tourism development in public protected areas in the lead-up to the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025

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Big Tourism has co-opted the IUCN tourism subgroup to promote land grabs for private tourism development in public protected areas, detracting from IUCN's conservation role. Recent political manoeuvres include a tourism-in-parks policy paper, proposed motions, and sessions at the World Conservation Congress 2025. We call upon IUCN to explicitly reject infiltration of industrial tourism into national parks, and recognise definitively that public protected areas are assets for conservation of biodiversity.

Protected areas are under continual pressure from multiple industries that seek to extract resources, use land for infrastructure corridors, or pollute air and water with effluents. These pressures create political conflict between conservation advocates, who aim to enlarge the protected area estate and safeguard it against anthropogenic impacts; and opponents, who want to reduce that estate and exploit it for economic gain^{1,2}. Park visitation, recreation, and tourism play ambiguous roles. In some cases they can provide political, social or economic support for protected areas³; in others, they create net costs and ecological impacts⁴.

Globally, the net aggregate ecological effect of tourism is strongly negative¹; but locally and at small scale, effects can be positive⁴. Small-scale examples are referenced deceptively by tourism property developers, operators, entrepreneurs, and industry associations, as political ammunition to argue for commercial tourism in parks. Big Tourism^{1,5}, a political alliance of large-scale tourism corporations, industry associations, and multilateral agencies, claims that it could contribute to conservation. In reality, it has consistently failed to do so, despite decades of opportunity. Instead, Big Tourism lobbies for land grabs, with net negative outcomes for conservation^{1,5}, and portrays protected areas as assets for tourism rather than conservation⁶. Here we use a political ecology approach^{7,8} to analyse its most recent moves. These manoeuvres are labelled as neoliberal conservation^{9,10} or nature commodification¹¹, but in reality they are political measures to gain private control of public assets without paying.

Political ecology

Political ecology^{7,8} analyses the ecological outcomes of political manoeuvres^{1,2}. Politics is partly hidden, through personal relationships, secret conversations and coercions, tit-for-tat transactions, and trade-offs between money and power¹². Limited information on individual interests and connections is publicly available from court reports, corporate share registers and annual financial reports, and individual social media and cv's. The most reliable data are from parliamentary inquiries and litigation, where witnesses give evidence under oath, but these are rarely available. Political stakeholders include multilateral, national, or subsidiary-state government entities, non-government organizations, and industry associations, which publish progress reports and policy documents. Many such documents are constructed as contributions to international congresses and consultation events. They can be analyzed to identify stakeholder interests and actions, and infer ecological consequences. Here we adopt this approach¹ for manoeuvres in the lead-up to the 2025 World Conservation Congress (WCC), held by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

IUCN issues paper

In the lead-up to the WCC, the tourism subgroup of IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), released a low-tier IUCN publication entitled “*Strengthening Sustainable Tourism’s Role in Biodiversity Conservation and Community Resilience*”¹³. This was funded by the US State Department for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. It is co-branded by tourism industry bodies World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (WSHA), and Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), but not the multilateral agency UN Tourism. Its listed authors are consultants and academics, including members of the executive of the IUCN WCPA tourism subgroup. The other >600 IUCN subgroup members were not given any opportunity for input.

The technical content of this report is largely a straightforward and readable recapitulation of earlier, more detailed, and higher-tier global IUCN Guidelines¹⁴, with some updates, such as the economic value of protected areas via mental health¹⁵. Repeated suggestions have been inserted, however, that the commercial tourism industry should be granted a direct role in key aspects of protected area management and monitoring, including financial aspects. This has little or no legal basis within national parks legislation, and is not endorsed by parks agencies or conservation advocates. The report incorporates only six case studies, a very small sample from >1000 examples now published in books, articles, graduate theses, and

Table 1 | Indicators of political intent for IUCN Issues Paper 7, & tourism at WCC

Indicators	Evidence
Compilation¹	
Transparency	No input from general members of IUCN tourism subgroup
Endorsement	Request for endorsement but no option to register objections
Timing	Released hastily in immediate lead-up to WCC
Communications	Internal subgroup emails called it a policy briefing
Content¹³	
Little new information	Most of report is summary of existing information
Uncontroversial majority	Most of report is uncontroversial and easily read
Buried political content	Hidden claims that tourism should co-manage parks
Fine-print model	Cf fine print in commercial and political documents
Unreferred	Apparently not refereed, no external quality control
Branding	
Piggyback off Guidelines ¹⁴	2018 Guidelines in multiple languages, >600 citations
Co-branded by tourism industry associations WTTC, WSHA, GSTC ¹³	No technical contribution, no authors, no funding; strong commercial interests in buried fine-print; one author is also author for earlier WTTC “Nature Positive” reports
Funding¹³	
Case studies	Very small and unrepresentative set ¹³
	Links to report authors, also advertised in WCC sessions ²⁹
Authorship (18 total)¹³	
4 from subgroup executive	Apparent interests in promoting tourism in parks
7 commercial consultants	Advertise and promote own projects, also in WCC sessions
2 retired professors	Acknowledged expertise in USA, Canada lends authority
7 mid-career academics	Interests in tourism and parks, potential future grants
2 members of NGO's	Interests in tourism and parks
WCC tourism sessions ²⁹	7 tourism sessions; only one addresses tourism impacts; the other 6 include the tourism subgroup and chair, present case studies linked to Issues Paper 7 authors, and promote tourism
WCC tourism motions ²⁹	IUCN WCPA tourism subgroup submitted a Motion, PROP-0425, “Catalysing Conservation: Sustainable Tourism as a Driver of Biodiversity and Resilience.” It was rejected.
	An Albanian conservation NGO successfully submitted Motion 130 ³⁰ , “Strengthening protective measures for protected areas against unsustainable tourism development,” opposing Albania Law No 24 (2024). That law would permit Big Tourism development in national parks such as Vjosa ³¹ , one of the cases promoted by the IUCN tourism subgroup ¹ .

¹IUCN tourism subgroup, Google® Group messages, Chair to members, 22-25 August 2025.

multilateral agency reports^{16,17}. The six case studies do not reflect global activities by WTTC and WSHA members. One is a private project in the UAE, and the others are small community projects in Nepal, Fiji, Brazil, Peru and Vietnam, and Europe and the Caribbean.

Political indicators

Numerous features of this Issues Paper¹³ (Table 1) indicate that it is a political document, aiming to create commercial opportunities for Big Tourism, and divert attention from land grabs. Its authors may believe its message, but if they do, they have become catspaws for international tourism industry associations, more experienced in *realpolitik*. By co-branding an IUCN WCPA document, Big Tourism undermines the authority of IUCN's other Commissions, and other conservation organisations. This report undercuts efforts by other IUCN elements, such as a new *Best Practice Guide to Sustainable Finance*¹⁸, and by OECD, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development¹⁹. It is a common tactic of conservation

opponents to coopt or divide conservation advocates, to diminish their political power². This is not the first time that IUCN has been compromised politically by industry²⁰.

The report reiterates claims that tourism can provide support for conservation, and the branding implies that Big Tourism will do this. But it has never done so, despite decades of opportunity, and there is no indication that it will do so in future¹. The report suggests a levy on tourism to fund conservation, as proposed at an Australian Academy of Science Fenner Conference many decades ago¹, but always opposed by the tourism industry. A levy is unlikely to happen, since practical mechanisms would be at national scale, and national tourism industry associations would oppose it on grounds of global competition. It is common political practice by Big Tourism: (a) to point to examples of small-t tourism¹ that do contribute to conservation; (b) to ignore the many cases of negative impacts on protected areas and threatened species and ecosystems⁴; (c) to hold out hope for potential future conservation funding which never actually eventuates; and

(d) to demand immediate and exclusive rights for private tourism developments inside public protected areas, which then cannot be rescinded except at substantial public cost²³.

Other recent events

In strong contrast to the IUCN tourism subgroup, the 2025 conference of the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) included a plenary presentation by Kris Tompkins, world-renowned co-founder and owner of large private conservation reserves funded partially by tourism. These include Pumalin in Chile, now granted to the Chile parks agency as part of Patagonia National Park; and Iberá National Park in Argentina. These make real net positive contributions to the continuing survival of threatened species. They are similar in structure to African camps and lodges operated by Great Plains, AndBeyond, Wilderness Safaris, Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and others, that make net positive contributions to conservation on private, communal and public reserves^{4,21}. Land grabs by private tourism developers in public protected areas continue to proliferate worldwide, enabled by compliant governments. There are new cases in Albania⁵, Kenya⁵, Zanzibar²², and Australia^{23,24}. There are also cases where private tourism companies have co-opted parks visitor cashflows, eg in Florida, USA²⁵. In New Zealand, new legislation allows de-listing of conservation reserves, for development²⁶. *IUCN Issues Paper 7* is thus part of a global political controversy, with major ecological consequences.

Discussion and conclusions

Political ecology analyses social goals, political mechanisms, and ecological outcomes. The human social goals of protected areas, as expressed in their establishing legislation, are first, the conservation of biodiversity and provision of ecosystem services, to support continuing survival of planetary ecosystems underpinning human economies; and second, low-impact independent recreation, to maintain and improve visitor health and happiness. Tourism has no rights to parks, but it does have two potential roles. The first is subcontracted support for visitor recreation, subject to parks agency control. This applies worldwide, but especially in developed and newly industrialised nations, where economic values of mental health benefits from park visitation far outweigh the economic scale of park tourism¹⁵. The second is political and economic support for parks, via economic opportunities for adjacent communities who could otherwise invade them^{1,3,14}. This applies mainly in developing countries and remote regions of newly industrialised nations. In some cases, but rarely, this can include small-scale private tourism lodges^{4,21}. In most countries and cases, private tourism development in public protected areas creates public costs for private profit¹.

The political mechanisms can be considered at different timescales. In the long term, the tourism industry is attempting to gain control of public protected areas through continual political efforts to present parks as tourism assets⁶, and lobbying for legislative changes and pro-tourism political appointees to lead parks agencies. In the shorter term, Big Tourism and its private-equity backers are using personal connections to high-ranking politicians, to gain special opportunities for land grabs by their own companies¹. There are many commercially successful nature-based tourism lodges on private lands, but Big Tourism wants publicly subsidised developments in public lands. In the recent World Conservation Congress and its lead-up, Big Tourism has used the IUCN tourism subgroup as a cat's paw, to infiltrate its goal of co-managing national parks into an IUCN publication. This goal was previously included only in reports by Big Tourism itself¹. Big Tourism was less conspicuous at WCC than at the Convention on Biological Diversity¹, but *IUCN Issues Paper 7* advances its political goals nonetheless. As in other industries¹², political manoeuvres can be analysed by tracking

the connections and interests of individuals involved, and dissecting the fine print of documents.

The ecological outcomes are numerous and significant. With few exceptions, such as the examples listed earlier, most fixed-site tourism developments have both on-site footprints and off-site access corridors for staff and utilities⁴. They clear and damage native vegetation and disturb native wildlife, including threatened species; and they introduce pathogens, weeds, and feral animals, which are expensive and difficult or impossible to remove subsequently⁴. Even small private developments can act as bridgeheads for endless expansion, as owners see additional opportunities for profit^{23,24}. Big Tourism in parks creates net loss to conservation.

IUCN's latest 5-year program and 20-year strategy documents, "Nature 2030"²⁷ and "Unite for Nature"²⁸, make no mention of tourism, recreation, or park visitation, even in a figure listing 71 policy options²⁷. Parks agencies, however, deal daily with visitor management and small-t tourism¹. Big Tourism will treat statements that IUCN will "engage with the private sector"²⁸, and "learn the language of investment and business,"²⁸ as open invitations. If IUCN wishes to "remain as THE (sic) trusted voice for nature"²⁸, it must learn that those languages aim for private profit, not public good. IUCN is a conservation advocate, but it can also be an unwitting tool of conservation opponents. It needs protection against political naïvety. For example, all its branded documents should surely be refereed externally before release. Members with commercial interests or other conflicts should not act as subgroup executives or authors. And in every public action and endorsement, IUCN should consider carefully whether it could be a dupe of development interests. In particular, IUCN is at risk of being a cat's paw for Big Tourism. We call upon IUCN to release a definitive statement on the functions of protected areas worldwide as assets for conservation, not tourism.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Author contributions

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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