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Nature positive rhetoric, risk and reality: sector-scale political ecology at CBD COP16

Ralf C. Buckley, Meisha Liddon, Sonya Underdahl, Zoë Jiabo Zhang, Mary-Ann Cooper, Alienor L. M. Chauvenet & Linsheng Zhong

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We analyse political manoeuvres by global tourism industry associations, and responses by conservation organisations, that create new risks to biodiversity. There are a few tourism enterprises that make net positive contributions to conservation. Nature positive terms, however, are being used for marketing greenwash, to delay and avoid environmental fees and regulations, and to lobby for land grabs in public protected areas.

Conservation outcomes are measured ecologically, but determined politically¹. Successful conservation, especially at global scale, relies on understanding *realpolitik*¹. Terms and concepts such as sustainable, responsible, offsets, and net-zero have been co-opted to delay and avoid environmental regulation and action. The same applies to the new term nature positive². We analyse this for the tourism sector, using a political ecology approach. We argue that the large-scale tourism development industry, backed by multi-trillion-dollar private equity, has co-opted the term nature positive to outwit global conservation interests, with net detriment to conservation. The political mechanisms are trackable at fine scale.

Political context

Nature-positive terminology operates within a political context². Politics is a multiplayer game, where individuals create and use institutions and deceptive communications to further their own aims. The planet has already exceeded seven of nine measurable ecological thresholds³: current human civilisation depends on the degradation of nature via consumption and waste discharges, and governments, businesses, and human societies are highly nature negative worldwide. The structure of human societies drives industries to: exploit public resources cheaply or subsidised; lobby for publicly-funded, privately-operated restoration programs using high-cost engineering rather than low-cost ecological methods; and design and exploit new policy programs, including nature-positive terminology, for their own advantage. These processes are directly visible in the tourism sector, as described here.

Big Tourism

The tourism sector represents 10% of global GDP, US\$11.1 trillion p.a. of US \$107.9 T p.a.⁴ (Fig. 1). The World Travel and Tourism Council, WTTC, represents 200 large corporations generating one-third of the total, US\$3.7 T p.a. Some individual companies are worth over US\$100 billion p.a. Most have little involvement with parks. Their main environmental impacts are from aircraft exhaust, cruise ship wastes, and resort footprints in areas of

high conservation value⁵. The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, WSHA, consists of 50 corporations controlling 50% of the world's hotel beds. Many tourism corporations are controlled by private equity, which has assets totalling US\$13.1 trillion⁶. The UN World Tourism Organisation, UNWTO, represents tourism at the United Nations. Jointly, WTTC, WSHA & UNWTO operate as Big Tourism. Some Big Tourism enterprises display green credentials, but these can be deceptive. This has continued for >30 years. They have now coopted the nature-positive concept by coupling it with political terminology of partnership¹.

Small-t and conservation tourism

The sector also includes small-t tourism: individual visitors to protected areas, and small-scale enterprises subject to effective control by parks agencies and regulations^{7,8}. Protected areas have a global economic value of US\$5.1 trillion p.a. from the mental health gains of individual visitors⁹. This is largely from developed and newly industrialised nations, and is 8.5× the global value of park-based visitor and tourism expenditure⁹. Effects of small-t tourism on expected time to extinction for individual populations of threatened species may be either positive or negative¹⁰. A small number of tourism enterprises, representing <0.01% of total tourism turnover, make net positive contributions to conservation¹¹. Most of these operate in developing nations, where inbound international tourism supports protected area agencies and threatened species^{10,11}. It also generates economic value in tourist countries of origin, via mental health benefits to tourists.

Conservation sector

The conservation sector is far smaller than tourism. Conservation succeeds locally, but biodiversity continues to decline globally¹². Funds raised via the Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD, fall far short⁴. Conservation interests worldwide are severely short of funds, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Global conservation expenditure is ~US\$10 billion p.a., mainly via government national parks agencies⁴. The budget of IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, is US\$168 million p.a., largely from multilateral and national government funds⁴: <0.005% the size of WTTC. IUCN has 1300 institutional and 16,000 individual members. It has no legal power, but governments use its *Red List* of threatened species¹³, its classification of protected areas, and the UNEP/IUCN *Protected Planet* reports. It includes an internal advisory group on tourism and protected areas, with expertise in visitor management and small-t tourism in protected areas⁷.

Interactions

We focus on interactions in the lead-up to COP16, 16th Conference of the Parties to CBD, between WTTC, WSHA, UNWTO, and IUCN. Data sources include: public documents and events; debates within IUCN; and

Fig. 1 | Financial scale of tourism and conservation. *totals; +examples; ++*pro rata* by member numbers. Figures approximate² or indicative.

	Tourism, US\$ p.a.	Conservation, US\$ p.a.
Global tourism sector*	1110000000000	
All WTTC members*	370000000000	510000000000 Parks health value*
Global parks tourism*	60000000000	
		7500000000 Global parks budget*
Parks concession ops ⁺	1000000000	2500000000 Private conservation*
Park lodge applicant ⁺	600000000	186000000 IUCN annual budget*
Conserv tour operator ⁺	25000000	
		100000 IUCN pro-tourism ⁺⁺
Small ecolodges ⁺	10000	10000 Some parks agencies ⁺
		1000 Local enviro NGO's ⁺

national park development proposals by WTTC member companies, including public responses and legal records. Extended Data (ED) 1 summarises the historical timetable of events. ED2 and ED3 are case studies of two WTTC members: an African gamewatching tourism operator with net positive contributions to conservation, and a global outdoor tour retailer that attempted to build five lodges in an Australian national park. ED4 summarises an IUCN tourism event at COP16. ED1–4 shows how WTTC, WSHA and UNWTO coopted IUCN in stages. In 2022, their consultant contacted IUCN tourism group members, reported as consultation with IUCN. In 2023, one WTTC member formed part of a land grab attempt in an Australian national park, abetted by subnational state government agencies, but opposed by local conservation and community groups. In 2024, the chair of the IUCN tourism group member invited UNWTO to form an MOU, and UNWTO invited WTTC and WSHA. This triggered debate within the IUCN tourism group, between those with tourism and ecology backgrounds, respectively. There are 837 group members, but <1% of this group, and <0.01% of IUCN, were active in this debate, which was quashed by the group chair. IUCN ran a tourism session at COP16, and WTTC ran a side event advertising their 'nature positive tourism partnership', later supported by the IUCN tourism group chair.

Outcomes and mechanisms

The outcome is that strategic manoeuvres and misinformation by Big Tourism, adopting nature-positive terminology and coopting a tiny subset of IUCN members with backgrounds in small-t tourism, has now enabled Big Tourism to claim IUCN endorsement for private tourism development in public parks, the land grabs targeted by private-equity investors, at net public ecological, social and economic cost¹. The tourism sector thus illustrates the real-life risks arising from rhetorical use of nature positive terminology. It is part of normal social structures that businesses pursue profits at public expense, and use greenwashing and socialwashing as one mechanism. It is unusual that major conservation organisations are so easily deluded. The six IUCN Commissions operate as silos, and most IUCN members are specialists in particular threatened species. The tourism group is a small element of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, WCPA. Most members of the tourism group do not play any active role. A very few members thus exert disproportionate influence. They argue, no doubt sincerely, that in the future Big Tourism will fund conservation. This, however, is highly unlikely. It has not done so historically or currently, despite ample opportunity, and real-life conservation tourism examples. It is promulgating greenwash and attempting land grabs¹, and these are thus far more probable outcomes for the future. Nature-positive terminology is one additional tool.

Options and opportunities

One reason that conservation organisations can be coopted by Big Tourism is that there are existing mechanisms by which small-t tourism and conservation tourism enterprises do contribute to protected areas and threatened species. For nature positive terminology to contribute, however, will require enforceable legislation¹⁴, as for protected areas⁸. There are many potential mechanisms and opportunities. Tourism enterprises can contribute funds to NGO's or conservation agencies that acquire and manage protected areas. They can fund conservation measures for individual species, such as captive breeding and translocation, or anti-poaching programs^{10,11}. Individual companies can buy land of high conservation value and establish tourism-funded private reserves. Large retail operators can bring clients and money to local conservation tourism enterprises. WTTC could establish a biodiversity trust fund through a small financial levy on member turnover, as first proposed over 30 years ago.

Delusions and conclusions

Conservation interests are deluding themselves. Big Tourism has had ample opportunity to support conservation, and has failed to do so. Using industry associations and multilateral agencies, Big Tourism is aiming to convince international conservation NGOs that it will be the saviour they need. In reality, however, it is coopting IUCN as a political lever to shift the power balance between development and environment portfolios in national and subnational governments¹, making it more difficult for parks agencies and NGOs to resist tourism land grabs¹. Use of nature positive terminology by WTTC, WSHA, and UNWTO is rhetorical and political, and creates new risks to conservation. Large-scale tourism development interests have manoeuvred for decades to gain greater control over public protected areas. Every country has different contexts and models for conservation finance and for recreation and tourism⁷. Successful connections rely on strong parks legislation and enforcement, and substantial fees^{7,8,11}, not on newly cooptable nature positive terminology.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Ralf C. Buckley ¹, **Meisha Liddon** ¹, **Sonya Underdahl** ², **Zoë Jiabo Zhang** ^{3,4}, **Mary-Ann Cooper** ⁵, **Alienor L. M. Chauvenet** ¹ & **Linsheng Zhong** ⁶

¹Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD, Australia. ²Edogawa University, Nagareyama, Chiba, Japan. ³Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. ⁴Wudalianchi Geopark, Harbin, Heilongjiang, China. ⁵Andrés Bello University, Santiago, Chile. ⁶Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China. ✉e-mail: r.buckley@griffith.edu.au

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Ralf C. Buckley.

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