

**Title**

Neoliberal capitalism and conservation in the post-crisis era: the dialectics of “green” and “un-green” grabbing in Greece and the UK

**Running Head**

The dialectics of “green” and “un-green” grabbing

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## **Abstract**

“Green-grabbing”, in which environmental arguments support expropriation of land and resources, is a recognized element in neoliberal conservation. However, capitalism’s strategic interest in promoting the neoliberalization of conservation is accompanied by attempts to exploit hitherto protected natures without any pretence at “greenness”. In this paper we explore the dialectics between “green” and “un-green” grabbing as neoliberal strategies in the reconstruction of nature conservation policies after the 2008 financial “crash” in Greece and the UK. In both countries, accelerated neoliberalization is manifested in diverse ways, including initiatives to roll back conservation regulation, market-based approaches to “saving” nature and the privatization of public nature assets. The intensification of “green” and “un-green” grabbing reflects capitalism’s strategic interest in both promoting and obstructing nature conservation, ultimately leaving for “protected natures” two choices: either to be further degraded to boost growth or to be “saved” through their deeper inclusion as commodities visible to the market.

**Keywords:** neoliberal conservation, green grabbing, privatization, deregulation, neoliberalization of nature, economic crisis



27 environmental purposes (or, in the case of “green-washing”, are justified by  
28 environmental arguments Apostolopoulou and Pantis 2010) with the ultimate goal of  
29 gaining profit (Corson et al 2013; Fairhead et al 2012). Such appropriations may reflect  
30 market opportunities associated with environmental legislation (e.g. to promote biofuel  
31 crops), responses to environmentalist fears (e.g. global food shortfall, or the loss of  
32 critical biodiversity), or direct appropriation of land for conservation that is  
33 subsequently made available as the basis for capitalist exploitation (e.g. ecotourism,  
34 carbon derivative trading, biodiversity offsets or species banking, Pawliczek and  
35 Sullivan 2011). In “green grabbing”, eco-friendly motivations are used simultaneously  
36 to hide policies that are destructive to both ecosystems and people and as a strategy by  
37 which capitalism seeks to advance itself as the means to “save nature”. These two  
38 disparate inclinations are brought together as a self-contained package: capitalism is  
39 used to solve environmental problems it has generated, in turn creating more problems  
40 and opportunities for capitalism to “help”; meanwhile all non-market based forms of  
41 conservation become illegible, progressively excluded from the dominant conservation  
42 discourse.

43         However, such “green grabbing” does not operate either without contradictions  
44 or evenly around the globe. Capitalism’s strategic interest in *promoting* a neoliberal  
45 version of conservation, via its further inclusion into market function, goes hand in  
46 glove with parallel processes whereby capitalism seeks to *obstruct* the conservation of  
47 species and ecosystems, and to grab and exploit hitherto protected natures *without* any  
48 “green” or “eco-friendly” argumentation. In this paper we term this latter process “*un-*  
49 *green*” *grabbing*, and we suggest that attention needs to be paid to its importance in the  
50 engagement between capitalism and nature in the post-crisis era. We define “un-green”  
51 grabbing as a form of land or resource grabbing that involves the exploitation and

52 appropriation of *protected* natures. Unlike “green grabbing”, it is not done in the name  
53 of the environment (Fairhead et al 2012). It is a distinct subset of general capitalist land  
54 or resources appropriation, and its dialectics with “green grabbing” highlight the dual  
55 outcome of a single exploitative engagement of capitalism with nature and its profound  
56 challenges for the feasibility of a radical environmentalist position.

57         Neoliberalism is a diverse and interlinked set of practices reflecting a  
58 heightened, evolved and more destructive form of capitalism (Heynen and Robbins  
59 2005, p 6) designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power (Harvey 2010, p  
60 18). Under neoliberalism, even though the state’s role as the central agent in the  
61 direction, legitimization and exercise of control over the use of nature is typically  
62 reduced (Castree 2008a, b), the state retains a role in the creation and preservation of an  
63 institutional framework for capital accumulation (Harvey 2005), and indeed in the  
64 protection of nature. Conservation by the state (e.g. protected areas and environmental  
65 legislation) constrains the freedom of capital to operate, and shapes its engagement with  
66 nature (e.g. protected landscapes and areas, regulation of development or pollution,  
67 incentives for eco-friendly behaviour, Adams et al 2014; Hodge and Adams 2012). We  
68 therefore believe that the state’s role remains critical in the balance between processes  
69 of “green” and “un-green” grabbing and in its changing dialectics in the post-crisis era.

70         In this paper, we explore the dialectics between “green” and “un-green”  
71 grabbing as neoliberal strategies in the reconstruction of nature conservation policies in  
72 a post-crisis era. We consider the aftermath of the 2008 financial “crash”, using the  
73 example of Greece and the UK, two developed EU countries. We focus on the  
74 processes of deregulation, reregulation, commodification and privatization and pay  
75 particular attention to the ways in which these neoliberal policies can facilitate and  
76 promote both “green” and “un-green” grabbing. Given the intensification of “un-green”

77 grabbing in both countries in the post-crisis era we also explore the opposition that it  
78 can awaken.

79 Greece and the UK share the formal structures of conservation common to all  
80 EU countries, but they have different state strategies, conservation histories and  
81 institutional regimes. These furnish interesting insights into the ways “actually-existing  
82 neoliberalisms” produce geographically distinct outcomes, offering insights towards  
83 understanding both the variegation and operational logic of neoliberalization (Büscher  
84 and Arsel 2012; Castree 2010; Neves and Igoe 2012).

85

### 86 **The contradictory character of nature conservation in the era of neoliberal** 87 **capitalism**

88 The contradictory relationship between capitalism and nature has been extensively  
89 investigated in the Marxist tradition. O’Connor (1998, p 165) has even referred to a  
90 “second contradiction of capitalism” associated with the undermining of capitalism’s  
91 conditions of production. The demand for profit along with the pursuit of accumulation  
92 for accumulation’s sake and the irreconcilable contradiction between use value and  
93 exchange value (Burkett 1999a) are not just characteristics of “greedy” capitalists; they  
94 rather lie at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. As Marx wrote in *Capital*  
95 (1890: 2002, p 199): the capitalist’s aim is to “produce not only a use-value, but a  
96 commodity also; not only use-value, but value; not only value, but at the same time  
97 surplus value”. It is this obsession with capital accumulation that distinguishes  
98 capitalism from the simple system for satisfying human needs it is portrayed as in  
99 mainstream economic theory and thus the natural environment is perceived by  
100 capitalism as a means, a “free” gift as Burkett (1999a) puts it, to the ends of profit-  
101 making and capital accumulation (Sweezy 2004).

102 But what is the role of protected natures and nature conservation in the pursuit  
103 of capital accumulation context? Protected areas (PAs), and the totality of natures  
104 under conservation status, are land-controlling mechanisms (Kelly 2011) for specific  
105 purposes. The ostensible purpose is the protection of nature for the public good. A  
106 variety of often-contradictory driving forces, have shaped the history of conservation  
107 and PAs. Their establishment by the state and non-governmental actors secured  
108 ecosystems (and sometimes public access to land) in the face of degradation caused by  
109 capitalism's expansion. Yet at the same time, their establishment often involved the  
110 displacement of local or indigenous people (Adams 2004). Protected areas enacted a  
111 radical separation of humans and nature, which as Marx argued in *The Grundrisse*  
112 (1857-1861) was essential to transforming the natural world into objects of exchange  
113 (Igoe et al 2010). Indeed, the way the protection of some areas implies the availability  
114 of nature elsewhere for exploitation, seems to reinforce the argument that "conditions  
115 for production may be created through environmental protection" (O'Connor 1998, p  
116 151).

117 Under capitalism, the state therefore has a complex double role, as "guardian"  
118 of both general capitalist class interests and nature. The clash between these roles has  
119 led to inadequate regulations to protect "the conditions of production" and ultimately to  
120 the degradation of ecosystems and the emergence of the "environmental crisis" (Foster  
121 1992). The core contradiction of conservation in capitalism lies precisely here: in the  
122 need to combine the preservation of nature as a resource for future capital  
123 accumulation with the exploitation to support current accumulation. Smith (2007)  
124 argued that since the 1970s, capitalism has dealt with this contradiction through  
125 environmental legislation and regulation to limit environmental despoliation at the  
126 hands of capital. This has effectively created a new scarcity: namely "allowable natural

127 destruction”. In the case of conservation, this is regulated by measures to protect  
128 specific habitats, species and ecosystems by constraining human activities.

129         The relationship between capitalism and conservation is contradictory, intense  
130 and diverse (Brockington and Duffy 2010; Büscher and Arsel 2012; Corson 2010; Igoe  
131 and Brockington 2007). Even though a non-exploitative relationship with nature cannot  
132 be achieved within capitalism, since it would require non-exploitative production  
133 relations, the particular ways through which this relationship is shaped as well as its  
134 material outcomes depend on the specifics of place and moment in history. Currently,  
135 capitalism attempts to gain profits from nature by its inclusion in the market not only  
136 through direct annexation and exploitation, but also through regulatory acts of  
137 conservation. These include attempts to legitimize itself as a socio-economic system  
138 that supports the sustainable use of natural resources in the form of the “green  
139 economy” (Corson et al 2013; MacDonald and Corson 2012; McAfee 1999; Sullivan  
140 2013b), and more broadly in supporting selected conservation activities. Neoliberal  
141 capitalism therefore promotes and frames mainstream conservation in order to render it  
142 open to capitalist expansion (Büscher et al 2012), proposing solutions to biodiversity  
143 loss and ecosystem degradation that hinge on the production and consumption of  
144 “ecological commodities” (Brockington and Duffy 2010) and on the assignment of  
145 prices to ecological phenomena. The increasing financialisation of nonhuman nature  
146 gradually renders it as the basis of strategies of accumulation (see Katz 1998; Smith  
147 2007).

148         The processes of privatization, deregulation and reregulation are key aspects of  
149 the neoliberalization of nature conservation and have been decisive in the facilitation  
150 and consolidation of both “green” and “un-green” grabbing processes. Deregulation  
151 and reregulation play a key role in “rolling-back” state “interference” in conservation



152 so that state regulation is “light touch” and more actors become self-governing, and in  
153 “rolling-out” state policies that facilitate the further privatization and marketization of  
154 nature (Castree 2008a). The privatization of hitherto public assets has been a signal  
155 feature of the neoliberal project, aiming to open up new fields for capital accumulation  
156 (Harvey 2005) and it consists of the assignment of clear private property rights to  
157 social or environmental phenomena that were previously state-owned, unowned, or  
158 communally owned (Castree 2008a).

159 In the current context, of a neoliberalism in crisis, we therefore witness not an  
160 end to nature’s exploitation but rather an intensification (see Smith 2010, p 266). As  
161 Harvey (2010, p 11) argues, financial crises “typically lead to reconfigurations, new  
162 models of development, new spheres of investment and new forms of class power”:  
163 that is also true of conservation.

164 In the following section, we consider the similarities and differences between  
165 provisions for conservation in Greece and the UK. Then we explore the neoliberal  
166 restructuring of nature conservation in the post-crisis era by paying attention on the  
167 dialectics of green and un-green grabbing.

168

### 169 **Nature conservation in Greece and the UK**

170 The history of conservation in the UK and Greece shows significant differences in  
171 institutional arrangements and political-economic background that illustrate the  
172 variegated character of nature conservation under capitalism.

173 In Greece, conservation has historically been state-initiated and mostly done on  
174 public land. The first national parks were established in 1938 and 1971, in periods of  
175 rule by dictators. The relevant conservation laws reflected the conservative concept of  
176 “untouched wilderness” (Apostolopoulou et al 2012). Neoliberal elements were brought

177 into conservation during the 1990s: an increase in the number of PAs was accompanied  
178 by the emergence of various partnerships between statal, parastatal, voluntary and  
179 market actors. “Protected nature” was positioned as a potential source of profit through  
180 various EU-funded projects, green products and tourist investments, and several non-  
181 state actors began to sit on important state committees whereas market proxies were  
182 clearly introduced in conservation legislation (e.g. law 2742/1999).

183         Although payments began to be made to private environmental actors, the  
184 private sector remained reluctant to invest in conservation. Capital perceived  
185 environmental legislation as threatening its interests, and governments avoided strict  
186 environmental controls on the freedom of landowners and businesses, on the grounds  
187 these would hinder economic development or private property rights (Apostolopoulou  
188 et al 2012). Delays, limited implementation, compromises and exceptions have been  
189 typical of attempts to pass conservation legislation (Apostolopoulou and Pantis 2009,  
190 2010).

191         In the UK, nature conservation was led by the state through the second half of  
192 the twentieth century. Until the end of the Second World War, PAs were almost all  
193 established on private land (Sheail 1976). Legislation passed by the Labour government  
194 in 1949 giving government a leading role in conservation, allowing creation of national  
195 parks and National Nature Reserves (Adams 2003).

196         Despite the engagement of the state, private landholders remained important to  
197 conservation: the majority of wildlife habitat, notified as Sites of Special Scientific  
198 Interest (SSSIs), existed on private land. In theory their value should have been taken  
199 into account in government decisions about planning and development, but business  
200 interests (and national economic arguments) often took precedence. Agriculture was  
201 exempt from planning, and intensification (backed by a strong private farming lobby)

202 caused rapid ecological degradation. From the 1980s, agricultural support under the  
203 Common Agricultural Policy not only funded intensification, but also, under growing  
204 agri-environment schemes, enabled payments by the state to private landholders  
205 (including conservation trusts) for conservation management.

206         There are significant commonalities in the protection of nature in Greece and the  
207 UK, mainly due to the Europeanization of conservation since the 1990s. The heart of  
208 EU conservation policy is the Natura 2000 network of sites, containing the most  
209 valuable or endangered species and habitats, designated by national governments under  
210 the Birds and Habitats Directives. In the UK, Natura 2000 built directly on a pre-  
211 existing system of designated conservation zones of national importance (Sites of  
212 Special Scientific Interest). On accession to the EU in 1981, Greece had no such system  
213 of protected sites. Since the Habitats Directive was transposed into Greek law in 1998,  
214 241 Sites of Community Importance (SCI) and 202 Special Protection Areas (SPAs)  
215 have been designated, forming the core conservation policy instrument in the country.

216         There are also both differences and similarities in the environmental movements  
217 in Greece and the UK. In the UK, the protection of wildlife, natural beauty and access to  
218 the countryside were important issues throughout the twentieth century (Adams 2003;  
219 Lowe et al 1987; Sheail 1976). Countryside conservation became a mass movement  
220 after the second world war: NGOs emerged and built large memberships, notably the  
221 National Trust (over a century old, with over three million members) and the Royal  
222 Society for the Protection of Birds and the Wildlife Trusts (both with about a million  
223 members). Some NGOs became substantial landowners, enabling them to become both  
224 the owners and managers of private land for conservation purposes (Adams 2003;  
225 Dwyer and Hodge 1996; Sheail 1976). In Greece, the environmental and conservation  
226 movement were smaller, and despite significant conservation conflicts (Apostolopoulou

227 and Pantis 2010) public environmental health was the key issue in environmental-social  
228 movements until struggles to protect conservation land from privatization and  
229 development projects developed in the twenty first century.

230

### 231 **Neoliberal restructuring of nature conservation in the post-crisis era**

#### 232 *Neoliberal restructuring and conservation in Greece*

233 In the first year following election of the PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement)  
234 government in 2009, the prime minister emphasized that Greece was shifting towards a  
235 “green economy” model; on many occasions big environmental NGOs clearly  
236 supported this agenda, as indicating a “positive step”<sup>1</sup>. This green rhetoric soon faded  
237 and even though investments in areas such as renewable energy remained important, the  
238 governmental agenda ceased to be framed in terms of a “green economy” discourse. On  
239 the contrary, the government’s “Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policy”,  
240 published in 2011 and 2012<sup>2</sup>, announced the creation of a “business-friendly Greece”  
241 (IMF 2011, p 143), marking a shift to fiscal austerity. The IMF and the EU played a  
242 decisive role in defining debt repayment as Greece’s priority: their reports regarding  
243 structural adjustment make no reference to terms like “biodiversity”, “nature”,  
244 “environment”, “sustainable development” or “green economy”, but instead to “growth”  
245 (i.e. IMF 2011, 2013; EC 2011); no room was made for even the rhetorical reference to  
246 capitalism’s ability to “save” nature.

247         Between 2010 and 2012, a variety of laws were promoted by both the PASOK  
248 government and its successor (a coalition between the centre-right and the centre-left  
249 parties elected in 2012). These fundamentally changed provisions for conservation and  
250 were related, in classic neoliberal fashion, to criticism of the efficiency, effectiveness,  
251 and reliability of the state and civil servants. New regulations were accompanied by an

252 increased role for the private sector and société anonymes, the downsizing of staff in  
253 environmental authorities, the merger of already understaffed environmental research  
254 institutes, and the dismantling of protected area administrations as well as a cut in funds  
255 for the Ministry of the Environment<sup>3</sup>.

256 In parallel to cuts in personnel and resources, an extensive deregulation began,  
257 aiming to boost investments by surpassing the obstacles of the legislation. Two laws  
258 (3853 and 3894 or the “fast-track” law) were passed in 2010 creating a “one stop shop”  
259 services for new businesses to attract investments and accelerate public-private  
260 partnerships. The “fast track” law defined a new category of “strategic investments” for  
261 which fundamental derogations from environmental law could be made to facilitate,  
262 inter alia, expropriations of public land. This opened up a route to “un-green grabbing”.  
263 The “fast track” law is applicable to all PAs types, except Natura 2000 areas of absolute  
264 protection and responsibility for its implementation was given to a société anonyme,  
265 called “*Επενδύστε στην Ελλάδα Α.Ε.*” (“Invest in Greece S.A.”).

266 The Greek state had a central role as market manager in facilitating “strategic”  
267 investment, and releasing capital from the restrictions of environmental protection. This  
268 involved mobilization and transformation of the whole institutional framework of the  
269 state, reflecting a close interplay of deregulation and re-regulation (see also Peck 2001).  
270 This had been a significant trend since the 2000s but in 2011 it was significantly  
271 extended by the “Aid for Private Investment” law (3908), which aimed at promoting  
272 economic growth by introducing state aid for the private sector to improve  
273 entrepreneurship, technological development, and enterprises competitiveness.

274 To facilitate “un-green grabbing” further, fundamental changes were made to  
275 environmental licensing, by simplifying and accelerating procedures to complete  
276 environmental impact assessments and approve environmental terms (IMF 2011; laws

277 3892/2011 and 4014/2011). Changes included exemption from environmental  
278 assessment of certain projects within Natura 2000 sites (e.g. housing development,  
279 shopping malls of up to 2,000 m<sup>2</sup>) and were combined with the permission to establish  
280 “Areas of Integrated Tourism Development” (POTA<sup>4</sup>). Some forms of land acquisition  
281 combined elements of “green” and “un-green” grabbing, notably the construction of  
282 renewable energy projects within PAs. Huge public subsidies were given to renewable  
283 energy projects (creating a debt accumulation in the Renewable Energy Account, IMF  
284 2013), and the government’s commitment to privatizing the Public Power Company  
285 (IMF 2013, p 172) was accompanied by land acquisition and development on land of  
286 conservation status. This “un-green” grab of protected land for ostensibly “green”  
287 purposes highlights the complex interplay of “green” and “un-green” grabbing.

288         Again the deregulation of legislation was followed by new regulations to allow  
289 such developments. These were included in the biodiversity law (3937/2011) which was  
290 (surprisingly) welcomed by the biggest ten environmental NGOs<sup>5</sup>. New regulations not  
291 only opened PAs to further exploitation but also legitimized past derogations allowing,  
292 inter alia, the post-facto legalization of illegal buildings within PAs. The Government  
293 argued that legalization would require paying a fine which would be deposited in the  
294 “Green Fund” to *offset* adverse effects. In 2013, the Fund had 1,9 billion euros, 1,5 of  
295 which comes from arbitrary building<sup>6</sup>. However, the “Green Fund” law (3889/2010)  
296 was amended twice, such that only 2.5% of funds could be used for environmental  
297 actions, while 97.5% would be transferred to the main state budget.

298         Over the same period, several laws (e.g. laws 4030/2011; 4042/2011) further  
299 reduced the scope of forest legislation by favouring exceptions to rules about the  
300 creation of mountain refuges, ski centers or tourist facilities in forest areas. In  
301 September 2013, the Ministry of Environment released new a draft law for consultation

302 that proposed to declassify 15% of Greek territory, opening up real estate to lands that  
303 are mainly covered with sparse arboreal, maquis and phrygic vegetation.

304 Underlying these policy developments was a commitment to the privatization of  
305 public land under the Greek structural adjustment program. The Hellenic Republic  
306 Asset Development Fund (HRADF) was established in 2011 under the medium-term  
307 fiscal strategy and launched “*the largest declared divestment programme in the*  
308 *world*”<sup>7</sup>, to attract revenue to be used for debt repayment. HRADF is a “société  
309 anonyme” (a private company, of which in this case the Hellenic Republic is the sole  
310 shareholder) and a Board of Directors, including business executives and two observers  
311 from the Eurozone and the EC, has the absolute authority on privatization decisions.

312 Natural areas have a prominent position in HRADF’s agenda, and claims about  
313 “*pristine natural environment*” and “*great natural beauty*” are used to attract  
314 investors<sup>8</sup>. The “Invest in Greece S.A.” website is dominated by images of Greek  
315 “*unique*” and “*diverse*” protected ecosystems (for example Ramsar sites)<sup>9</sup>. Public  
316 conservation land was included in privatization proposals from the very beginning: the  
317 initial list of state properties to be privatized (ICARP 2010<sup>10</sup>), included the area of  
318 Prasonisi (Isle of Rhodes), to be sold for mass tourism, including a Natura 2000 site  
319 (GR4210031<sup>11</sup>). A few months later, HRADF’s portfolio included a new property in  
320 the area of Kassiopi (on Corfu), for the development of an upscale residential complex,  
321 including vacation villas and hotel/leisure facilities. The Kassiopi area included three  
322 inland wetlands for the protection of which the Ministry of Environment has started  
323 specific initiatives during 2012<sup>12</sup>. In September 2012, a new list was announced of 40  
324 islands available for development, 24 of which were Natura 2000 sites and four were  
325 within national parks<sup>13</sup>. In February 2013, the first 100% foreign direct investment in  
326 Greek public lands for the past 15 years was agreed: the board of HRADF granted a

327 concession for 99 years<sup>14</sup> over Kassiope to NCH Capital, an American fund<sup>15</sup>. In the  
328 same month, a law passed from the Parliament further facilitating the leasing of  
329 islands<sup>16</sup> whereas few months later a new island (Issos) was added to the HRADF's  
330 portfolio again including a Natura 2000 site.

331           The government's willingness to sell and the private sector's willingness to  
332 buy, protected land, both in line with IMF's requirements, faced the same obstacle:  
333 "strict" legislation. The former minister of the Environment and the Executive Director  
334 for housing at the HRADF argued in March<sup>17</sup> and in September<sup>18</sup> of 2012 respectively,  
335 that environmental licensing legislation was one of the main barriers in state's attempts  
336 to boost investment and allow development of public property by third parties. In April  
337 2012, the EC also noted in its publication "*Growth for Greece*" that land-use planning  
338 and environmental licensing rules were often "obstacles to investment"<sup>19</sup>. In September  
339 2012, an interview with a consultant of "Private Islands Inc." was published in Greek  
340 blogs entitled "*Change the laws and you will sell all your islands*". In this context, the  
341 Minister for the Environment in a meeting of EU Ministers of Environment (Vilnius,  
342 July 2013) characterized Greek PAs as "over-protected" and "hostile ... to economic  
343 activity"<sup>20</sup>.

344

#### 345 *Neoliberal restructuring and conservation in the UK*

346 In the UK, transformations in provision for conservation following the crash began with  
347 the change of government at the 2010 elections. The Labour government was defeated,  
348 and a coalition was formed between the centre-right Conservative and the centre left  
349 Liberal Democrat parties. Post election policy showed this to be strongly liberal in  
350 ideology, with a Budget focused on rapid reduction of the deficit in public accounts.  
351 The shift to fiscal austerity matched (or even exceeded) the budget of 1981 (Keegan



352 2010), introduced under the first conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979-  
353 83), the UK's archetypal proponent of neoliberalism. Yet the new Prime Minister, the  
354 Conservative David Cameron, claimed in May 2010, during a visit to the Department of  
355 Energy and Climate Change, that he wanted the new administration to be the "greenest  
356 government ever" (Randerson 2010).

357         A key feature of this attempt at deficit reduction was cuts to government  
358 departments and quasi-autonomous government bodies (QUANGOs), alongside public  
359 services. A number of environmental organisations were targeted, such as the Royal  
360 Commission on Environmental Pollution and the Sustainable Development  
361 Commission. By the autumn, the RSPB observed that the UK was entering "a period of  
362 deep and prolonged green austerity" (Comerford et al 2010). The October Spending  
363 Review spelled out the deep cuts faced by the Department for Environment, Food and  
364 Rural Affairs (DEFRA). These reached 30% (£700m by 2014-15), compared to an  
365 average of 19% across government. Significant reductions in Natural England staff  
366 numbers were reported (The *Guardian* reported 5-8,000 out of 30,000, Jowitt 2010).

367         In the *Coalition Agreement* published on 20 May 2010, the incoming  
368 government committed itself to a range of actions aimed at reducing regulation of  
369 businesses. These included a commitment to cut "red tape", introducing a "one-in, one-  
370 out" rule whereby no new regulation would be brought in without other regulation being  
371 cut by a greater amount. There was also a commitment to replace what was described as  
372 a culture of "tick-box" regulation with "targeted inspections of high-risk organizations"  
373 through "co-regulation and improved professional standards"<sup>21</sup>.

374         In July 2011, the government announced a drastic simplification of planning  
375 regulations controlling development (GOV.UK 2011). It proposed to cut over a  
376 thousand pages of planning advice to around 50 pages, to "encourage sustainable

377 [economic] growth” (Vaughan 2012). Notwithstanding the rhetoric of “sustainable  
378 development”, the government’s aims were clear: “growth at any environmental cost to  
379 jolt the nation’s flatlining economy” (Vaughan 2012).

380         Perhaps the most significant way in which neoliberalization found purchase in  
381 public policy for conservation after 2008 is through the idea of nature providing  
382 “ecosystem services” (Norgaard 2010). This rhetorical and material strategy is a key  
383 feature of the neoliberal turn in conservation (Brockington and Duffy 2010; Büscher et  
384 al 2012; Hodge and Adams 2012), and a key determinant in strategies of “green  
385 grabbing”. The concept of ecosystem services provides a means by which nature can be  
386 made visible to capital (Robertson 2006). It makes ecological functions subject to  
387 exchange and sale (Kosoy and Corbera 2010), and provides a standard metric for nature  
388 allowing it to be commodified (Robertson 2004). The construction of nature as a  
389 “service provider” (Sullivan 2009) in this way is a fundamentally neoliberal strategy,  
390 the essential step to the financialisation of nature (Robertson 2004; Sullivan 2013a, b).

391         The idea of nature as a source of wealth (The Secretary of State for the  
392 Environment referred to ‘Mother Nature’s Bank’ in launching the 2011 Environment  
393 White Paper)<sup>22</sup>, matched both the new government’s conservative ideology and its  
394 views of the fiscal requirements of retrenchment in public finances following the bailout  
395 of the private banking sector. The UK government engaged strongly with the  
396 Convention on Biological Diversity’s “ecosystem approach”, especially Principle 5,  
397 expressed the importance of conservation of ecosystem structure and functioning in  
398 terms of the need “to maintain ecosystem services” (CBD 2013). The concept of  
399 “ecosystem services” was placed at the core of government environmental policy-  
400 making and delivery (Hopkins 2013). The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA),  
401 published in 2011, sought to provide a complete account of the ecosystems that could

402 be held to comprise natural value (UK NEA 2011). Ecosystem services were  
403 fundamental to The UK government White Paper on the natural environment, *The*  
404 *Natural Choice: securing the value of nature* (DEFRA 2011). The UK government also  
405 established a Natural Capital Committee, to report to the Chancellor of the Exchequer,  
406 and an Ecosystem Markets Task Force “to gain the maximum benefits for UK  
407 businesses from new market opportunities which protect and improve natural capital”  
408 (DEFRA 2013a).

409         A key element of UK government strategy to create economically efficient links  
410 between capital and nature was the concept of “biodiversity offsets”. These involve  
411 allowing losses to biodiversity in one place (and at one time) to be compensated by  
412 gains elsewhere. Thus valuable nature need no hold up development: habitats can  
413 simply be created (or the protection of existing habitats enhanced) elsewhere. The  
414 approach is controversial within conservation because of conceptual flaws and problems  
415 of compliance and monitoring (Bull et al 2013), and is widely critiqued in accounts of  
416 the neoliberalization of conservation (e.g. Pawliczek and Sullivan 2011, Sullivan  
417 2013b). DEFRA tested the approach with the government conservation adviser Natural  
418 England, and local governments in six pilot areas in England, and published a  
419 discussion paper in September 2013<sup>23</sup>. Further development involved DEFRA and a  
420 series of private organisations (including engineering consultants and contractors and  
421 the aggregates industry). In November 2013, the Parliamentary Environmental Audit  
422 Committee described the approach as simplistic and an admission of failure of the  
423 planning system: it suggested the approach should be put on hold<sup>24</sup>. Newspapers  
424 described the approach as “a license to trash nature” (Carrington 2013).

425         The UK government’s enthusiasm for the ecosystem service approach (backed  
426 by engagement from ecologists and conservationists, for example in the NEA) was

427 accompanied by a specific attempt to promote un-green grabbing by privatising public  
428 nature assets by selling off state conservation and forestry land. In August 2010, the  
429 government proposed the sale of National Nature Reserves (NNRs; Jowitt et al 2010),  
430 and in October, it proposed the sale of the government Forestry Commission estate.  
431 One newspaper commented that the government seemed intent on “asset-stripping our  
432 national heritage” (Hickman 2010).

433           Debate over sale of government forests proved more protracted and if anything  
434 more controversial (Lucas 2011), particularly over the question of public access to  
435 forest land (Hodge and Adams 2013). The debate focused on England, since the  
436 Scottish Government and Welsh Assembly Government rapidly distanced themselves  
437 from the policy, although on-going forest sales in Scotland were in fact extensive  
438 (Johnson 2011). Although, speaking to the House of Lords Environment Committee in  
439 November 2010, Jim Paice, Minister of State for Agriculture and Food, acknowledged  
440 that the sale reflected the need to balance the government’s books following the  
441 banking crash, saying “I am not going to avoid the issue here - there is a need for  
442 capital receipts”<sup>25</sup>, the Environment Secretary claimed that “this is not a fire sale by a  
443 cash-strapped state” (Spelman 2010).

444

#### 445 **Opposition to ungreen grabbing in Greece**

446 In Greece, the government’s neoliberal agenda has been mainly criticised by parties of  
447 the radical and communist Left<sup>26</sup>. The biggest environmental NGOs have been trapped  
448 in highly contradictory positions. They have welcomed initiatives that they considered  
449 positive (such as the presidential decree for wetlands protection or the biodiversity law),  
450 while criticising others that they considered to be negative (such as laws regarding  
451 environmental licensing and forests or attempts to lease islands)<sup>27</sup>. NGOs have been in a

452 particularly awkward position in relation to the EU. In previous decades it had been  
453 common for Greek NGOs to blame the government for not implementing EU  
454 conservation policy. However, now NGOs such as WWF International are seeking (in  
455 vain) to enlist EU support against the environmental impacts of rapid economic  
456 restructuring in Greece (Rehn and Potočnik 2012).

457         The most significant struggles against privatization and deregulation have been  
458 from local committees. From 2010, communities on Rhodes and Corfu expressed their  
459 objection to the privatization of Kassiopi and Prasonisi, and in the case of Kassiopi they  
460 treated the conservation status of Natura 2000 sites as official<sup>28</sup>. The municipality of  
461 Corfu, the Region of Ionian Islands and island's residents appealed to the Council of the  
462 State against the decision to grant a concession to NCH Capital. Similar opposition is  
463 now being expressed for the case of Issos Island.

464         A prime example of local protest against the privatization of nature assets  
465 concerns a proposed gold mine in the primeval forest of Skouries (Halkidiki, NE  
466 Greece). Previous efforts to implement a mining investment plan were cancelled by the  
467 Council of the State in 2002 due to their severe environmental impacts. In 2011 and  
468 after several transfers of the assets between companies with the mediation of the state,  
469 the mines were transferred to the "Eldorado Gold Corporation", a Canadian company,  
470 and the Environmental Impact Assessment was approved. The area of exploitation  
471 covered 26,400 ha with 90% forest cover, including Natura 2000 sites<sup>27</sup>. Since 2011  
472 mass demonstrations have been organized against the expansion of mining activities. In  
473 March 2012, the first 410 ha of public forest were conceded to begin the project's  
474 implementation. Several scientific bodies also expressed strong opposition,  
475 charactering the project as a violent intervention in a unique natural area with  
476 irreversible impacts. However, the government emphasized the scale of investment at

477 Skouries, bringing jobs and local welfare and formed a coalition, including scientists  
478 and local authorities, to support the project's implementation<sup>29</sup> while forcefully  
479 repressing environmental struggles<sup>30</sup>.

480         Despite the violent repression of demonstrations, key non-state actors and  
481 media have adopted the government's line of rhetoric, even where they have otherwise  
482 sought a "green" profile. Thus SKAI television (whose website often portrays staff  
483 engaged in volunteer environmental activities<sup>31</sup>), has systematically criticized the  
484 struggles against the exploitation of Skouries<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, the newspaper *Kathimerini*  
485 equated them with the actions of neo-nazis (Golden Dawn) in East Attica<sup>33</sup>. During  
486 October 2013, 27 anti-goldmine activists of Chalkidiki were charged with the same  
487 crime as the leaders of Golden Dawn: formation of a criminal organization.

488         The Skouries movement has gained international solidarity, with  
489 demonstrations around the world. The citizens of Chalkidiki have placed their  
490 opposition to the current development model at the core of their struggle and have  
491 criticized both the unprecedented criminalization of their struggle and the unequal  
492 distribution of costs and benefits of the project<sup>34</sup>: profits for Eldorado and Hellenic  
493 Gold corporations and costs to the community in the form of ecological impacts, public  
494 health (e.g. pollution of water resources, soil and air) and traditional economic  
495 activities (e.g. agriculture, livestock, apiculture, fishing, aquaculture, organic farming  
496 and beekeeping<sup>35</sup>).

497

#### 498 **Opposition to ungreen grabbing in the UK**

499 In the UK, when the government suggested privatising National Nature Reserves in  
500 2010, conservation NGOs found themselves in an awkward position. Some held  
501 discussions with government about which NNRs they might accept and the terms under

502 which they might do so. Most looked like unattractive acquisitions: isolated and  
503 expensive to manage. The government conservation adviser, Natural England, also  
504 explored the possibility of creating a new charity specifically to manage NNRs. Neither  
505 option was cheap, and both would need considerable public subsidy. While the  
506 government might have hoped for the “Big Society” to take on the costs and managing  
507 public assets of high conservation value, the intention to reduce government  
508 expenditure precluded provision of the resources needed to make NGO management  
509 sustainable. The government retreated: on 4 February 2011, the Secretary of State for  
510 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Caroline Spelman, announced the end of plans  
511 to remove NNRs from public ownership (Mendick 2011).

512         There was a similar sharp public backlash against the proposed forest sales. In  
513 January 2011, as the government began a public consultation on the proposal, a  
514 YouGov poll found that 84% of people agreed the woods and forests should be kept in  
515 public ownership for future generations (Carrington 2011). The protection of  
516 biodiversity on forest land, and public access, were important issues (Hodge and  
517 Adams 2013). By mid February, over half a million people had signed a petition on the  
518 web site *38 Degrees* to “save our forests – don’t sell them off to the highest bidder”<sup>36</sup>,  
519 the strength of opposition surprising both government and NGOs. Conservation NGOs  
520 were vilified for their cautious approach, failing to back the public campaign and  
521 apparently willing to cherry pick forests of high conservation value (Porritt 2011). The  
522 national campaign was successful. On 16 February, the Prime Minister announced the  
523 end of plans to sell forests, and abandonment of the consultation that had been due to  
524 run for a further nine weeks (Watt and Vidal 2011). The government appointed an  
525 Independent Panel to review of forestry policy. After widespread consultation, its final  
526 report in 2013 concluded that the public forest estate should be retained in public

527 ownership, and held “in trust for the nation”, and they proposed the appointment of  
528 “guardians” or “trustees” directly accountable to Parliament to oversee forest  
529 management. The recommended an expansion in the area of woodland in England  
530 (from 10% to 15% of land area) by 2060. These recommendations were subsequently  
531 almost entirely accepted by government (DEFRA 2013b).

532         There has also been local opposition to the sale of public nature assets and  
533 developments proposed by commercial interests. In addition to the large national  
534 campaign against public forest privatization, here were local campaigns, for example  
535 HOOF (Hands Off Our Forest), to keep public ownership (and commoners’ rights) in  
536 the ancient Forest of Dean<sup>37</sup>. There was also extensive local opposition to the proposal  
537 by the American Trump Organisation to build a golf resort complex on the Scottish  
538 coast North of Aberdeen (Arts and Maffey 2013). The Trump Organisations purchased  
539 the Menie Estate in 2006, including a large area of undeveloped sand dunes, part of  
540 which was a SSSI. The government conservation organisation, Scottish Natural  
541 Heritage, advised against the development, and Aberdeenshire Council turned the  
542 application down in 2007. The Scottish Government “called in” the application,  
543 claiming it was a decision of national (Scottish) significance because of the number of  
544 jobs it would create. In 2008 the decision was overturned and planning permission  
545 granted (Ford 2011). The Trump Organisation began to try to buy out local landowners.  
546 Local protests, about the development itself, the way the decisions were taken, and  
547 (increasingly) the way protests were policed, mushroomed. A movie about the protests  
548 was made in 2011, and shown by the BBC in 2012<sup>38</sup>. The golf course complex was  
549 officially opened in March 2012<sup>39</sup>. A petition with over 11,000 signatures was lodged  
550 with the Scottish Parliament in March 2013 asking for a public inquiry into the handling  
551 of the development by national and local governments (Arts and Maffey 2013).



552 **The dialectics of green and un-green grabbing under capitalism in crisis**

553 Governments in both UK and Greece have used the economic crisis as a “Trojan horse”  
554 to enable the further neoliberalization of nature conservation. The intensification of  
555 “green” and “un-green” grabbing by showing in a sense the two sides of the capitalist  
556 coin can capture the deepening of the contradictory ways in which capitalism under  
557 crisis engages with “protected natures”. On the one hand capitalism actively promotes a  
558 neoliberal version of conservation, leading to conservation increasingly becoming “the  
559 *friend* of capitalism” (Büscher et al 2012). On the other hand, capitalism actively  
560 obstructs conservation to allow the exploitation of hitherto protected land perceiving  
561 conservation to be an “enemy” to unlimited capital accumulation.

562         Attention to the dialectics of “un-green” and “green” grabbing is of crucial  
563 importance for three main reasons. First, even though the appropriation and degradation  
564 of nature has been at the core of the capitalist enterprise, the current intensification of  
565 “un-green grabbing” marks a new era where governments are forcefully taking back  
566 environmental regulations that have been shaped by the competition among capitals but  
567 also won through environmental and social movements and hard class struggle (Harvey  
568 2005; Vlachou 2005). The establishment of PAs resulted from such a conjunction of  
569 factors and, crucially, the rolling back of conservation frameworks designed to protect  
570 ecosystems from degradation along with the reversion of public conservation land into  
571 the private domain entails the loss of rights (Harvey 2005, p 161). In the post-crisis era,  
572 capital has sought to intensify the exploitation of protected natures through “un-green  
573 grabbing”, a process made possible because capital has been able, to a large extent, to  
574 make the state apparatus its own entrepreneurial entity, “a purer catalyst of capitalist  
575 expansion than ever before” (Smith 2010, p 260).

576           Second, it shows the radical transformation that neoliberal logics and practices  
577   pose to our theoretical and political understanding of the social relationship with nature  
578   while implying contradictory normative assumptions about nature itself. Neoliberal  
579   conservation accepts the capitalist framing of protected nature as underpinning value,  
580   and the absence of market pricing is blamed for limiting conservation success.  
581   Ecosystem services science is pivotal to such approaches, both quantifying ecosystem  
582   services as measured, transactable units across space and time (Robertson 2004), and  
583   attributing monetary values and rendering nonhuman nature conceptually “docile”  
584   (Sullivan 2013a). Meanwhile, in the context of “un-green grabbing”, protected nature is  
585   framed by capitalism (and the neoliberal state) as holding back the creation of value and  
586   potentially in conflict with development and growth. This contradictory representation  
587   of protected natures reflects specific material conditions and particularly the fact that  
588   the tensions within capitalist politics over ensuring that the free gifts of nature are both  
589   available to capital on an easy basis and also sustained for future use have become acute  
590   (see also Harvey 2010, p 76).

591           Indeed, the dialectics of “green” and “un-green” grabbing as played out in  
592   Greece and UK shed light on the fact that there is no common, global, capitalist strategy  
593   consisting of a commitment to promote neoliberal conservation; the relationship  
594   between capitalism and conservation is contradictory and thus unstable and uncertain in  
595   its outcomes (see also Vlachou 2005). Currently, the ultimate result of the dialectics of  
596   “green” and “un-green” grabbing is the *deepening* of the production of nature both  
597   *quantitatively*, through the rapid intensification of exploitation, and *qualitatively*,  
598   through adding new elements in nature’s exploitation. The *why* behind the simultaneous  
599   intensification of the “*real*” and “*formal*” (Smith 2007) subsumption of nature is  
600   strongly related to capitalism’s environmental contradictions which neoliberalism

601 makes manifest more than any other mode of environmental governance (McCarthy and  
602 Prudham 2004) and further deepens them during periods of economic crisis (Peck et al  
603 2012). The crisis has been used by capital as an engine of capitalist restructuring,  
604 jockeying for a better position (Harvey 2011) by, inter alia, securing public assets and  
605 carving out new areas for capital accumulation. Biodiversity conservation, in as much  
606 as it is instrumental to capitalism's growth and reproduction (Brockington and Duffy  
607 2010), has a particular role in this context: to create "new symbolic and material spaces  
608 for global capital expansion" (Corson 2010, p 579). However, this is just one side of the  
609 story. Even though *mainstream* nature conservation (Igoe et al 2010) has been reshaped  
610 by a significant penetration of capitalism into conservation discourse and practice, we  
611 argue that it has not yet achieved a complete transformation of conservation to a "win-  
612 win" scenario for capitalist interests: conservation legislation is still a barrier to the  
613 unlimited grabbing of public land, as the Greek case clearly shows.

614 Third, the fact that "green" and "un-green" grabbing processes unfold unevenly  
615 in Greece and the UK sheds light on different state strategies and governmental  
616 responses. In Greece, the primary strategy does not address the benefits for biodiversity  
617 conservation that could result from its inclusion in market relations but rather its further  
618 exploitation through capitalist development. In the UK, perhaps because of the  
619 importance of private landowners and enterprises to the delivery of conservation, and a  
620 highly market-orientated public culture (three decades after Thatcherist privatisation),  
621 strategies pointing towards the argument that creating green markets is necessary for  
622 *saving biodiversity* appear much stronger.

623 As Marx (1890: 2002, p 779) explained in the first volume of the Capital "*public*  
624 *debt becomes one of the most potent levers of primitive accumulation*". In Greece, the  
625 paroxysmal character of the crisis and the springing of the "debt trap" (Harvey 2005, p

626 162) are being systematically used to justify, inter alia, the deregulation of  
627 environmental legislation and the privatization of public nature (and other) assets,  
628 fulfilling longstanding demands from the private sector. Even before the crisis, Greek  
629 capital was in most cases fighting against environmental regulation. Given the limited  
630 success in establishing strategies to derive profit through the conservation of nature *per*  
631 *se*, the market-based conservation strategy attractive to state and capital in the UK held  
632 no appeal. The debt crisis was used as an argument to legitimize “un-green grabbing”  
633 through overturning the barriers of environmental legislation in order to further exploit  
634 “protected” natures and facilitate investment. The policy of massive privatization by  
635 offering capital cut-price opportunities for profitability, establishes in a EU country an  
636 accumulation model previously tried out in the Global South and the countries of  
637 Eastern Europe (Kouvelakis 2012).

638         However, in both countries there is a post-crisis intensification of “un-green  
639 grabbing”, which has been opposed by the public. Even though there are in both  
640 countries cases of governmental suppression of struggles there are also differences in  
641 the political handling of opposition which raise important issues. In the UK, strong civil  
642 society organizations, and a less acute debt crisis, partly constrained neoliberal  
643 strategies such as the sale of state nature assets. In Greece, in the context of an  
644 increasing crisis of hegemony (in Gramscian terms), forced imposition of extreme  
645 neoliberal reforms became possible, not only under the threat of bankruptcy but also  
646 through upgrading the role of the EU and the IMF and delegating responsibilities to  
647 *société anonymes*. The parallel intensification of autocratic governance and “un-green  
648 grabbing” processes has contributed to the emergence of conservation struggles in  
649 Greece where mobilized social groups are fighting for the protection of conservation  
650 land - being “conservationists” without naming themselves as such.

651 Overall, the intensification of “green” and “un-green” grabbing reflects the  
652 inherent weaknesses of the capitalist system in formulating a positive response to the  
653 challenge of managing the biophysical world (Harvey 2011). Ecological decline can  
654 threaten capitalist production in the long term, however, individual capitalists, working  
655 in their own short-term interests and impelled by competition laws are perpetually  
656 tempted to adopt the position “*après moi le deluge*” (Marx 1890: 2002, p 282) with  
657 respect to both the labourer and the soil (Harvey 2010, p 71). The latter is obvious in the  
658 case of “un-green grabbing” but it can also be evident in the case of “green grabbing”  
659 which despite the hegemonic framing, as a successful strategy for nature conservation,  
660 is itself a growth industry (see also Burkett 1999b) through which “corporate capitalism  
661 manages to reframe a genuinely use-value concern”, such as halting the degradation of  
662 ecosystems, “into a question of economic value that is entirely inimical to the original  
663 concern” (Smith 2010, p 249), ultimately creating a version of conservation that is an  
664 image of itself. Overall, both the Greek and UK cases show that the current post-crisis  
665 production of nature does not signal just an expansion of capitalist economy toward the  
666 industrialisation of new resources, but the making of a *new social world* (Smith 2007;  
667 Robertson 2012) leaving for “protected” natures two choices: either to be further  
668 degraded to boost growth or to be “saved” through their deeper inclusion as  
669 commodities visible to the market.

670 In this context, radical conservation scholarship faces a potential deadlock: in  
671 opposing mainly neoliberal conservation and “green grabbing” and de-emphasizing  
672 “un-green grabbing”, it is at risk of positioning itself against any possible form of nature  
673 conservation. In response, we suggest that opposition to the capital appropriation of  
674 nature, either with or without “green” argumentation, needs to be balanced by  
675 recognition of the rights of citizens to seek to oppose the degradation of ecosystems.

676 Opposition to land grabs by capital (or the state on behalf of capital) and to the  
677 deregulation of environmental legislation do not imply support for the neoliberal model  
678 of mainstream conservation. It means acknowledgement of the possibility of a positive  
679 relationship between human society and non-human nature through radical change. To  
680 address such dilemmas it is of critical importance to disentangle the genuine material  
681 concern about and opposition to ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss from the  
682 specific ways that capitalism responds to them, and thus to ask by whom conservation is  
683 promoted or obstructed in each case and for what purposes. It is therefore an important  
684 question whether, in the era of capitalism in crisis, there are potential anticapitalistic  
685 elements in emerging conservation struggles.

686

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<http://www.skai.gr/news/greece/article/229024/mitarakis-uper-tis-ependusis-hrusou-stis-skouries-halkidikis-/>; <http://www.skai.gr/news/greece/article/224330/to-igme-uper-tis-ependusis-stis-skouries/>
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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35LUjnE52M4&feature=share>, and:  
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