

Systematised data collection in protected areas: supporting or surveilling field conservation staff?

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As part of efforts to reduce the loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, the systematic collection of data on field conditions and effectiveness of conservation efforts is currently being mainstreamed. This is especially the case in protected areas, notably through the large-scale adoption of an open-source software, the Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART). Analyses have been produced based on the data it holds but critical reflexion on its contribution to fair and effective conservation programmes is still missing.

SMART's aim is to support conservation work by providing indications to direct efforts in a resource-strapped sector and create a visual data archive that can be used to evaluate projects. Those whose activities are made most visible through this technology are the on-the-ground conservation staff, who collect the data. Their movements are also recorded and stored and can be used to control their work despite large distances, thereby putting additional pressure on often poorly paid employees, already working in challenging conditions. This affordance of the technology has been unequally resorted to and rangers' reaction to this system has varied widely according to implementation sites.

This presentation links interviews of SMART users and promoters with literature on the introduction and appropriation of electronic monitoring systems in the workplace (Zubroff, 1988; Ball and Wilson, 2000; Evans and Kitchin, 2018). It highlights the potential this technology has to reinforce the gap between the top and the bottom of workplace hierarchies in the field of conservation and provides elements to help understand the variations in appropriation and resistance to its implementation.