THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Goat Culling on Saba:

By
Kiara Houston

July 2021

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in the
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Faculty Advisor: Ryan C. Jobson
Preceptor: Victoria Gross

"The Dutch settler wants to have a policy on Saba like in South Africa where it is one settler one bullet. He is advocating one goat one bullet and laying the blame on the politicians. Saba people have their own history and goats have been and will continue to be a part of that history. When a hurricane passes and I see a goat I see food. If the Dutchman don't like goats then obviously he is in the wrong place, and should he leave MANY MANY people will be saying GOOD RIDDANCE!! More people should be keeping goats and not less" (Johnson 2013).

Former politician Will Johnson writes on his online publication, *The Saba Insider*, in 2013 about the Dutch Government's developing goat eradication plans on the island of Saba in the Dutch Caribbean. Now, 7 years later, I arrive to an island still covered in free-range, but owned, goats that are ostensibly threatened by a Dutch hunter-duo awaiting the arrival of special guns and approval to begin the culling of all wild, unclaimed goats.

Introduction

Invasive species are a growing concern as global transportation networks increase the likelihood of both terrestrial and marine organisms entering non-native territories and wreaking havoc on "native" flora and fauna. When considering "native" vs "non-native," or exotic, species, researchers typically use the arrival of Europeans to mark the introduction of "non-native" species; the taxonomy of "non-native," or invasive, species raises several questions concerned with usefulness, human-centricity, and the invasiveness of conservation efforts (van Dooren 2011). The Greater Caribbean as a whole is home to a unique set of geopolitical landscapes, such as the intense industrial developments of the 20th century that increased the population of "non-native" species, but it also provides a landscape in which what is "non-native" is negotiable. What is "non-native" may not be considered "invasive" due to its usefulness, and what is "native" may be categorized as non-useful and may be considered as undesirable as a "non-native" species.

It is with a critical understanding of the taxonomy of "invasive" species (van Dooren) that I approach the plans to eradicate the goats on Saba, which are motivated by both conservationist ideologies and constituents of development that shape Saban perceptions of progress and, conversely, "backwardness." In addition to social conflicts around ideas of development, the issue of goat culling also raises questions of sovereignty and self-sustainability. Some view the Dutch as overstepping boundaries by attempting to remove any species from the island without the power of removal in the hands of Sabans by literally assigning locals to goat patrolling and allowing them guns—which are illegal in Holland. Others perceive this action as adequate and appropriate for the Dutch government—it is the role they should fill as the government presiding over Saba. Additionally, when goats are considered a resource entwined with the culture of an island, the removal of this resource raises questions about the ability of a non-sovereign state to self-determine and to provide for itself. However, the Dutch and Saban governments have made available several layers of assistance for goat owners to tag, control, and care for their goats. Despite these efforts, too many owned goats still roam free, thus the situation has been elevated to an extermination of as many free-range goats as possible. Throughout the free-range goat culling process, several points of contention and confusion have emerged including where and how goats will be killed, who is responsible for the killing and upkeep, and why the goats should be culled to begin with. These points of contention are inextricably tied with the realities of non-sovereignty on Saba and constituents of development curated on the island amongst locals and government administration and in Holland among Dutch administration.

In addition to interrogating questions of sovereignty and nativity, this thesis will evaluate the growing ecotourism industry that relies on pristine, rugged nature to attract a nature-oriented tourist. Understanding the requirements of an ecotourism-driven economy can illuminate the

"goat problem" from a different perspective and raises questions about the sustainability and stability of such economic endeavors. While this thesis will not attempt to prescribe treatment for the "goat problem" on Saba, I approach this social-environmental conflict to examine the multi-layered perceptions that shape Saban and Dutch understanding of conservation efforts and to evaluate the dynamics of resource/food security, sovereignty, economy, and environment that are pervasive throughout the Caribbean. This thesis argues that every attempt at conservation and "invasive" population control stems from a collective set of economic, political, and environmental desires that must be fully interrogated to one: determine the best method of conservation action and two: create a climate of willingness and understanding that allows for the complete involvement of locals in conservation efforts. This thesis considers the paternalistic nature of non-sovereignty, particularly in the Caribbean, but also interrogates the nature of "representation" that our Western, Democratic society considers the epitome of public involvement and the influence of neoliberal ideologies on a small, rapidly changing island like Saba. I argue that as public policy is drafted and implemented, constituents of development must be carefully assessed and addressed to make long-term sustainable change, and that the economic and political climates of a population, such as poverty education, and sovereign status, must be considered to avoid the constant dissolution of conservation efforts.

Saban History

Saba is a small island in the Caribbean Netherlands, about five square miles across, that has been largely unexplored in English-speaking anthropological research of the Greater Caribbean. In the last thirty years, however, this island has been at the center of an increasingly lucrative ecotourism industry, as it boasts one of the most diverse ecosystems in the Caribbean with terrestrial and marine life that makes it a popular stop for hikers and divers alike. What was

once an agricultural and fishing island made up of European immigrants and the descendants of enslaved African people is gradually being transformed into a nature retreat for global visitors. In the last forty years, this island has also been at the center of an increasingly complex system of Caribbean non-sovereignty. Saba has been a Dutch, British, and Spanish colony, later turned a semi-autonomous body of the Netherlands Antilles in the early 2000s and, following its dissolution, finally becoming a public body of the Dutch Caribbean in 2010 (Mulder). Nikki Mulder writes of the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles in the early 2000s, which led to Sabans' desire to develop a closer relationship to the Dutch, eventually leading to the incorporation of Saba into the BES, or the Caribbean Netherlands, comprised of Saba and neighboring islands St. Eustatius and Bonaire (Mulder.) Despite the lucrative tourist industry developing on the island, Saba still struggles with low per capita income, job instability, and depopulation (Sullivan). Additionally, a reliance on imports for basic necessities—such as fresh produce—leaves the island increasingly vulnerable to ecological damage caused by invasive species and arriving planes and ships.

Saba is one of the most ecologically diverse islands in the Caribbean[1], and the island is home to both desert and tropical fauna and to an Elfin Cloud Forest, an extremely rare high-altitude rainforest (pictured in figure 1 and 2.) Located Southwest of the island is the Saba Bank, the world's largest underwater atoll home to rare marine animal and plant species. These environmental factors have made Saba a particular location of concern for Caribbean conservationists and boosted its notoriety amongst nature tourists. These environmental features play a vital role in shaping Saban and Dutch constituents of development and conservation on the island, with clear visions of what species, animals, people, and social/cultural/economic

[1] "Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas (EBSAs): Saba Bank."

practices should be protected and maintained or transformed to better suit projects of development.

Figure 1 and Figure 2, Elfin Cloud Forest[2]

Literature

This thesis builds on literature from Latin American and Caribbean studies of food and resource security, post-colonial sovereignty, considerations of the nature, purpose and risks of conservation efforts, and the economic and political project of ecotourism and development. This thesis evaluates all of these dynamics as equally important components in shaping modern concepts and practices of development throughout the Greater Caribbean. As I evaluate the current conflict around free-range goat removal on Saba, several texts help to contextualize my argument that the tensions surrounding goat removal are the results of conflicting cultural, environmental, socio-economic, and political values.

[2] All photography was captured by researcher

In *Non-Sovereign Futures*, Yarimar Bonilla argues that there is a pervasive feeling of "disenchantment" with the project of sovereignty throughout the Caribbean. Sovereignty is an ideology that has been presented as the natural next stage of social, political, and economic development for a "civilized" body, but in reality, it is the projection and construction of Western ideologies that do not operate in a one-size-fits-all approach (Bonilla 2015). This complex, negotiable relationship between a non-sovereign country and its presiding government is evidenced on Saba where rebuking the Dutch outright is exchanged for tactful, critical dialogue exchanged between the Dutch and Sabans. In "Stories of Autonomy on Non-Sovereign Saba: Flipping the Script of Postcolonial Resistance," Nikki Mulder of Leiden University writes,

> "The concern of this article is… recognizing that the people of the postcolonial world might tell tales and engage in practices aimed at improving their (collective) lives in ways that challenge supposed universal truths of political modernity. I thus encourage an examination of state power and resistance in non-sovereign contexts that looks beyond grand narratives of overthrowing or changing the system" (Mulder 2018).

Mulder considers Sabans as interlocutors, theorizing their own experiences as citizens of both Saba and the Netherlands and actively negotiating their economic, political, and social needs and environments. Though Nikki Mulder captured stories of autonomy on Saba, she did not focus on particular rhetoric amongst Sabans that accused or condemned the Dutch as overstepping boundaries in their governing practices.

My research, which focuses on the conflict surrounding free-range goat removal, builds on Mulder's by homing in on the impassioned political discourse used to condemn both the local Saban government and the Dutch government's role in affecting Saban life and culture. The discourse concerned with environment and development highlights conflicting ideologies on Saba about "where Saba should go," as the Dutch attempt to develop plans that sometimes satisfy and other times alienate Sabans. Additionally, my research incorporates local knowledge

of politics and history that shape the current Saban understanding of a "proper" government, and the way these ideologies both align and deviate from Dutch bureaucratic practice and Western ideologies of Democracy, sovereignty, and neoliberalism. It is in the ways Sabans navigate these realities that Bonilla, and subsequently Mulder provide important interrogations of post-colonial discourse concerning sovereignty and "freedom."

Some "old timer" Sabans invoke the rhetoric of freedom, which is echoed in the quote with which I started this thesis. According to this line of thinking, the Dutch should leave if they don't like how Saba works. Much of the Saban-Dutch relationship is a navigation of these kinds of extremes, as two different cultures, climates, and people encounter one another and try to get the best for themselves out of the deal. While one might not find strong anti-colonial rhetoric among most people on Saba, one will encounter language concerned with maintaining Saban identity, culture, and environment as a part of colonial resistance (Mulder 2018). It is with these considerations that the goat removal project is viewed as another point of navigation in the evolving Saban-Dutch relationship, where Saban constituents of development both align with and diverge from Dutch projects and plans for development. When considering the conflict between Dutch and Saban expectations of the free-range goat culling process, several dynamics of non-sovereignty must be taken into account including local education standards, the prominent role foreigners play in conservation efforts on the island, and a considerable disconnect between Saba culture and attitude and the Dutch approaches to political and environmental projects that lead many Sabans to view Dutch action as paternalistic and baffling. To navigate the discourse and planning surrounding the free-range goat culling project on Saba, it is critical to consider the taxonomy of invasive species, a categorization that both the Dutch

and Saban governments are contending with as they deal with both ecological concerns and local and foreign constituents of development.

Thomas van Dooren's "Invasive Species in Penguin Worlds: An Ethical Taxonomy of Killing for Conservation" evaluates the Australian project of fox elimination for the purpose of conserving the dwindling little penguin population. In considering "taxonomy," van Dooren is concerned with the language of "pest," a concept that reinforces human concepts of "nativeness," "invasiveness," and "biodiversity." While he provides neither a solution for the ethical conflict of killing for conservation nor an argument that we should not kill for conservation, he considers the ways human classifications impact the treatment of organisms in the project of conservation. This is a critical concern in the process of killing goats, but also in the process of "returning to nature" that the goat culling is being presented as and the perceived environmental—and ultimately economic—benefits that these developments promise to provide.

Daniel Botkin's work serves as a reminder that not everything "natural" occurs outside the realm of mankind, and not everything facilitated by mankind is "unnatural" (2001). Van Dooren argues the same principle as he pushes back against the classification of "invasive" species as species that arrived to particular locations following the settling of Europeans. He argues that this oversimplification of non-European interactions with environments Eurocentrically suggests that Europeans are the first to have extensive and transformative relationships with their environment. Botkin also argues for a careful consideration of the political project of returning to "nature," where the "natural" is considered a static past state that can be once again achieved by human intervention, a goal Botkin argues is not only impossible, but risks both biodiversity and obstruction of truly natural processes (Botkin 2001). On Saba, these arguments are particularly salient, as some scientists have already concluded that many

species on Saba likely arrived by “natural” phenomenon such as seeds drifting across the ocean or arriving in the waste of marine and terrestrial animals as they passed by the island. The plants germinated by such seeds could be considered “invasive” but are instead protected under conservation regulations. The classification of goats as “invasive” is called into question by considering the discursive work of the title of “invasive.” More broadly, the human project of conservation as a whole claims to desire a “return to nature” that also positions humans as the experts on “the natural,” determining what is invasive, what is necessary, what deserves to be conserved and what interferes with our plans of progress and development.