Title: Tourism and Conservation: A Critical Look at the Relationship between Rhetoric and Practice
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Abstract:
Tourism is promoted by policy makers and international organizations as a tool for advancing conservation agendas, while contributing to poverty alleviation and human development, under the banner of ecotourism or sustainable tourism. However, the indiscriminating use of complex and ambiguous concepts such as "poverty" and "sustainability" hide important nuances with regards to the variety of processes and subsequent effects that are triggered when tourism and conservation are being adjoined. Experiences with tourism developments show that destinations that are weak economically find it harder to draw benefits from tourism developments or to decline participation in tourism with only little or no losses of sources of income and wealth. If tourism should fulfil sustainability goals related to conservation, poverty, and human development, it needs consistent governmental intervention and a generalized commitment of actors involved in the networks that enact its provision and consumption. When such commitments are limited or absent, tourism can become a tool for entrapment of local destinations onto paths of economic dependency that can hardly be reversed.
This paper takes a closer look into the process of commodification of nature in order to examine the institutional, economic, and social conditions that enable destinations to benefit from conservation through tourism. Using examples from conservation-based tourism projects in Tanzania, the paper makes a critical examination of the relationships between the rhetoric that promotes tourism and conservation, the sets of values mobilized by this rhetoric, and the tourism practices that enact it. Concluding reflections raise questions regarding the likelihood that a tourism that fosters social and environmental agendas can thrive under current market conditions.