

Conservation in Africa: but for whom?

The challenges of environmental conservation are invariably complex. In Africa the increasing pressures of human population growth and economic development merge with idiosyncratic customs, intricate political systems, greed and corruption to overwhelm many conservation efforts. Furthermore, environmental conservation is often misconstrued as a hindrance to economic prosperity, apparently disenfranchising the poor by denying them the right to improve their livelihoods. Consequently, conservation has in many cases become something to be resisted, thus portending a rather bleak outlook for Africa. Here I discuss some issues that, in my view, beget this unfortunate situation, and assert that there is still considerable hope for the environment and for biodiversity conservation in Africa but that we may be seeking solutions in inappropriate ways or places. These are also matters that are touched upon in various ways in the four perspectives on conservation in Africa in the Forum section of this issue of *Oryx* (Cowling & Wilhelm-Rechmann, 2007; Inogwabini, 2007; Newby, 2007; Sitati, 2007).

In Africa I see a stakeholder divide; conservation means different things to different people. On the one hand are conservation proponents, the converted, including various individuals, environmental NGOs and international conservation organizations that defend biodiversity as a priority in their occupation or vocation. On the other hand are the unconverted, those that either are yet to be convinced about the merits of conservation, as promulgated by the converted, or have different opinions and priorities. These comprise most rural communities, Governments, and the general public, and also many economists and corporate organizations. Given this dichotomy it is reasonable to ask what conservation really is and for whom it is intended. This raises an issue of scale. Most conservation priorities are set at global, regional or national scales (Myers *et al.*, 2000; Fishpool & Evans, 2001). However, most conservation initiatives in Africa target rural communities living adjacent to biodiversity rich areas, i.e. at the local scale. Because most policies are not formulated at this level, formulators commonly propose blanket measures that can overlook delicate local differences. Internationally or nationally driven conservation measures can, for example, threaten rural livelihoods through the imposition of protected areas

that disregard local peoples' needs. Unsurprisingly, such exclusionist actions cause chronic conflicts of interest.

Next is the issue of class. Many rural people in Africa consider the proponents of conservation to be wealthier than them. Consequently, they tend to be suspicious of conservationists' true intentions, especially when they are not compatriots. The lingering, bitter colonial aftertaste and the plunder of natural resources by the wealthy and politically connected further fuel this distrust. These not entirely unfounded misgivings need to be cleared before conservation can gain ground. Because of this cynicism perhaps nowhere is Cassandra's curse so poignantly played out as in Africa. When not disregarded outright, environmental and biodiversity concerns are taken to have no bearing on, or relationship with, human existence. Many of the rural poor dissent when they feel they remain poor or are getting poorer because of either direct or indirect conflicts with wildlife as pointed out by Sitati (2007), whereas conservationists earn a living from the same wildlife. The rural poor generally regard environmental problems as something to worry about only when one can afford to do so. Paradoxically, albeit not entirely by choice, the lifestyles of many rural communities in Africa are perhaps amongst the most sustainable; they use few resources and leave much smaller ecological footprints. It leaves me musing about who should be teaching whom about conservation.

Given these complications, what can we do to ameliorate the situation in Africa? I feel that, firstly, we need to improve communication. The converted and the unconverted must have open-minded and sympathetic discussions with each other. In particular, local communities must feel their needs are being respected because, ultimately, they are the custodians of the resources. Fortunately, because they depend on these resources directly, they are often the easiest to convert; in essence they have always been converted. I would also argue for a departure from the unrelenting focus on rural communities, broadening communication reach to the real unconverted, the urban dwellers. I feel that, symbolically, too much is made of the cutting down of that last tree and too little emphasis laid on the preceding annihilation of the rest of the forest.

Secondly, we need to rebuild a holistic vision, re-connecting the environment, biodiversity and human

lifestyles, aspects of which have been discussed by Pyle (2003). The challenge is to link wastage of water in Kampala, purchase of hardwood furniture in Lusaka, and the Johannesburg to Cairo flight with the endangerment of the rhino, the floods in Mozambique and the expanding Sahara. Ultimately, we have to figure out how to make people freely opt to reduce their ecological footprints. As articulated by Western (2000), to succeed, conservation must be as widely understood as hygiene, and as voluntarily practiced as bathing. It is not just about economics and not just about local people, it is about recreating a collective sense of existence, with humans more in touch with the environment, as highlighted by Newby (2007) with respect to the Sahara.

Thirdly, we need to remember that whilst the work to understand biodiversity loss lies within the realm of conservation biology, the formulation and implementation of policies sits predominantly in the domain of organization. To organize ourselves to protect nature and promote human well-being we must address issues related to land tenure and human and property rights, as well as improve representation of environmental concerns in public arenas. Unless the converted join these forums, conservation will progressively dwindle into irrelevance. Finally, there is the need for a genuine push for social justice and equality at all levels. To realize this requires both an enabling atmosphere and support from incumbent Governments, as argued by Inogwabini (2007).

So, does science and conservation retain a role in Africa? It can seem unclear; it is easy to feel powerless and overwhelmed by the issues and problems facing the continent. In my opinion, conservation biologists must continue to conduct salient research that responds to policy needs at all scales. But this is clearly not sufficient. We also need to bring environmental issues into public arenas, influence policy or even become policy makers. As Plato warned, those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber.

There is a great deal of resilience in Africa, and there is also real hope for the environment because many rural people still rely directly on it. The primary motivation for conservation should reside not only in

the remnant fauna and habitats but with the continent's people too. In the course of my work in the Taita Hills forests in Kenya (Githiru *et al.*, 2007), for example, when I ask the local people what they think would happen to them if the remaining forest fragments were to disappear suddenly, their lamentations are akin to the muted cries of the area's endemic and Critically Endangered Taita thrush *Turdus helleri*. Local people have the knowledge and desire to conserve their region's natural resources, and this knowledge, desire and hope could be better harnessed for conservation (see also Cowling & Wilhelm-Rechmann, 2007). There are no silver bullet solutions for conservation problems; we all need to keep talking to each other without letting the perfect get in the way of the possible.

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