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COMMUNITIES, WILDLIFE AND THE 'NEW CONSERVATION' IN AFRICA

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Abstract: Over the last decade the concepts, policies and practices of conservation in Africa have begun to shift towards what has been viewed as a community-based approach. This introductory paper to the Policy Arena argues that the ideas underpinning this shift—a greater interest in local level and community-based natural resource management, the treatment of conservation as simply one of many forms of natural resource use and a belief in the contribution that markets can make to the achievement of conservation goals—are better understood as a ‘new conservation’. This new conservation is presently diffusing through Africa both challenging ‘fortress conservation’ and working alongside it. It is no panacea for the problems that conservation faces but it does provide a basis from which more effective policies and institutions can evolve. Copyright © 1999 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concepts, policies and practices that underpin conservation in Africa have been challenged by a set of radical alternatives over the last decade. Although these challenges have commonly been perceived as a move towards putting ‘community in conservation’ (Agrawal, 1997) and are widely referred to as community-based

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conservation (Western and Wright, 1994) or community conservation1 they are more complex than the simple dynamic of a shift of responsibility and authority from the state to the ‘community’ suggests. They not only incorporate local society into conservation but they also introduce the market and redefine the content of conservation itself. In effect these challenges constitute a ‘new conservation’ that seeks to take both the theory and practice of conservation beyond the colonial and neo-colonial construct of ‘fortress conservation’ (Adams and Hulme, forthcoming) that has shaped it throughout most of this century.

2 THE NEW CONSERVATION: SOCIETY, SUSTAINABILITY AND MARKETS

There are three particular strands of argument guiding the new conservation. These are woven into conceptual frameworks, policies and practices in different ways by analysts and managers of the African environment so that the new conservation can take many different forms.

The first strand contends that conservation should move from being a state-centric activity to being more based in society, and particularly in society at the local level. Local society is usually conceptualized as the ‘community’ and this has fostered ideas about community-based conservation and community conservation. At their core is the rejection of the notion that rural Africans can simply be viewed as degraders of the environment. Indeed, the indigenous technical knowledge of rural Africans indicates that they have sophisticated understandings of environmental processes. Instead, they must be recognized as ‘citizens not criminals’ (Hulme and Infield, forthcoming) with rights and responsibilities over the nation’s conservation estate (be that species, habitats or biodiversity). Conservation no longer requires that man (i.e. African women and men) and nature be kept separate by state coercion.

Although this has meant that ‘... communities are now the locus of conservationists’ imaginings’ (Agrawal, 1997, p. 8) these imaginings take many different forms. At one extreme is the radical conceptualization of a totally community-centred approach to conservation that transfers all management responsibilities and full property rights over natural resources to communities at the local level. Community-based natural resource management (Rihoy, 1995) initiatives come closest to this position and such ideas have informed practice in Namibia (see Jones in this journal) and is the direction that many engaged in Zimbabwe’s CAMPFIRE programme (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) believe it must move if it is to fully realize its potential (see Murombedzi in this journal). At the other extreme are conceptualizations that see the community not as proprietors of the nation’s conservation estate but merely as its neighbours. The achievement of conservation goals requires that ‘people and parks’ be good neighbours (Brandon and

1 Our own research project is entitled ‘Community conservation in Africa: principles and comparative practice’. This reflected our key readings at the time of research grant application, especially Western and Wright (1994), and the influence of the African Wildlife Foundation’s Community Conservation Programme. Inevitably, we have helped promote the idea that recent changes in conservation approaches in Africa are community-based, however our research did go ‘beyond the community’ and has led us to propose that a ‘new conservation’ is shaping policy and practice in Africa, not simply ‘community conservation’.

Wells, 1992) but not that they comanage resources. Such an emphasis leads to a focus on park outreach strategies (revenue-sharing, public relations, conflict resolution, community development) and comes close to the basis for the community conservation programme at Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda (see Infield and Adams in this journal) and Tarangire National Park in Tanzania (Kangwana and Ole Mako, forthcoming).

Commonly, allied to these notions about involving communities in conservation is a desire to right, at least partially, some of the wrongs that have been borne by rural Africans in the name of conservation. Almost everywhere conservation has had adverse effects on local livelihoods and not infrequently these have involved violence against people and property as at Lake Mburo National Park in Uganda (Hulme and Infield, forthcoming), and forced resettlement with associated long term deterioration of living standards, as at Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania (Brockington and Homewood, 1996).

The second strand of the new conservation relates to the conceptualization of conservation itself. This has shifted as the idea of conservation as preservation has been challenged by the notion of sustainable development in which both conservation and development goals are achieved at the same time. No longer do things that are to be conserved (species, habitats or biodiversity) have to be automatically set aside: rather, they can be viewed as renewable natural resources that can be utilized as long as that does not compromise sustainability.

Many factors have led to this shift in the meaning of conservation. These include neo-liberal thinking about the role of markets (see following sections); arguments from the ‘new ecology’ (Botkin, 1990) that environments are inherently dynamic and not simply moving towards a ‘climax’ or equilibrium position; a recognition that many ‘natural environments’ (particularly where pastoralism and grazing occur) have been shaped by human activity; and, an acceptance of the case that much conservation thinking was ‘environmental imperialism’ prioritizing Western conservation goals over African development needs. As the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) has cautioned ‘it is both futile and an insult to the poor to tell them that they must remain in poverty to protect the environment’.

Sustainable development has proved a slippery concept, however, and is open to widely differing interpretations. At the risk of over-simplification we can place interpretations on a continuum between two poles. At one pole lies ‘sustainable utilization’ arguing that natural resources should be carefully utilized so that key natural processes (e.g. the hydrological cycle and the renewal of soil productivity) are not compromised. However, significant environmental change is acceptable—including species loss and reductions in biodiversity—where the costs of retaining those environmental characteristics are judged to be excessive by local resource users. At the other extreme are biodiversity fundamentalists who argue that sustainability means that utilization must not threaten any species’ existence. Some such groups argue that utilization practices must remain ‘indigenous’ (Patel, 1998) an argument which Neumann (1997) sees as equating indigenous resource users with the primitive and seeking to block their preferences for ‘development’. In between these two poles

2 At the most extreme position are animal rights groups who argue that no wild animal should be killed for sport, consumption or other purposes.
lie many other positions, where the majority of individuals and agencies engaged in conservation or development tend to place themselves.

The third strand of the new conservation lies in the neoliberal economic thinking that has dominated the late twentieth century. This argues that unfettered markets give individuals the greatest freedom in choosing what to produce and consume and that patterns of natural resource use (including conservation) are best determined by market processes. From this theoretical perspective comes the dictum ‘use it or lose it’. If species or habitats are to be conserved they must not be protected from market forces as that will place control in the hands of an inefficient state that will allow them to degrade as rent-seeking public officials take bribes from poachers and timber companies. Rather, they must be fully exposed to a market (free from distortions that create perverse incentives) where their uniqueness and scarcity will lead to high economic values being placed on them so that the likelihood of conservation is greatly enhanced. Consumers (i.e. tourists, trophy hunters, the media and people who intrinsically value a species or habitat) will bid prices up so that alternative uses that would degrade the environment, particularly agriculture, will no longer be attractive to producers (i.e. the proprietors and managers of the resource).

These arguments have been presented most publicly over the issue of elephant trophy hunting and ivory sales. They claim that where elephants are conserved but not utilized then local resource users view them as a pest (a very big pest) destroying livelihoods through crop-raiding and threatening human life. By contrast, where elephants are fully utilized (tourism, trophy hunting, ivory, skin and meat sales) in ways that provide economic incentives to local resource users then people will protect and manage elephants and place a high priority on the maintenance of elephant habitat.

As with the other strands, the way in which these ideas are applied in the new conservation varies considerably. For many conservationists neo-liberal ideas are simply an add-on to their thinking: ‘we must also think about economic incentives’. At the extreme position are those who see the operation of the market as the ultimate determinant of resource use and thus conservation: if the market does not place a high enough value on a species or habitat then it will be lost so that humans can achieve other goals that have a greater priority.

3 THE NEW CONSERVATION AS PRACTICE

The ideas discussed in the previous section — the role of communities in conservation, the merging of conservation and development goals implied by ‘sustainable development’, and the acceptance of the role of markets in shaping human behaviour and patterns of natural resource use — have become so widely accepted in African conservation that they constitute a new orthodoxy. State conservation agencies, multilateral and bilateral aid donors, and conservation and development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) now all talk of these issues as central to their strategies and actions. While it would be convenient to claim that this new orthodoxy had displaced the old orthodoxy (or in academic parlance to argue that the counter-

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3 Neoliberal analysis also argues that the market distortions created by state subsidies for irrigation water, fertilizer, agricultural research and extension should be removed. The removal of subsidies would make other forms of natural resource use (e.g. wildlife ranching and tourism) more attractive to local resource users.
narrative has displaced the narrative) inevitably things are much more complex. As in all processes of social change elements of both the ‘new’ and ‘old’ are intermingling: sometimes the new displaces the old, sometimes the old successfully resists the new and, most common of all, some accommodation is reached in which both new ideas and practices and old ideas and practices are mixed. Of one thing there can be no doubt, however: the old orthodoxy of conservation purely as state enforced protection, that evolved in the colonial era and was continued by the elites who took control of independent Africa in the 1950s and 1960s is no longer presented as a viable option by any serious actors. At the very least ‘fortress conservation’ has to work alongside the new conservation: whether that is as the dominant party or as a junior partner remains to be seen.

While much has been written about the principles that underpin the new conservation much less is known about the ways in which these ideas are being converted into policies and practices. Very little is known about the achievements of this new conservation despite widespread media coverage suggesting that certain initiatives, such as CAMPFIRE, are a blueprint for effective conservation across Africa. The three studies presented in this Policy Arena seek to shed light on the ways in which the new conservation is shaping policy and practice and on initial achievements. They are part of a larger study on conservation policy and practice in Eastern and Southern Africa (Hulme and Murphree, forthcoming a).

Murombedzi’s study takes a critical look at Zimbabwe’s acclaimed CAMPFIRE programme. This is an initiative that is toward the radical end of the new conservation as it involves the devolution of property rights and management (to rural district councils but not communities), has enraged many conservationists as it utilizes (i.e. harvests) elephants and other animals as part of the natural resource base, and since it highlights the role of economic incentives in shaping human behaviour. Murombedzi’s analysis is not one of the glib and superficial accounts based on secondary data that threatens to convert CAMPFIRE into a myth. It is based on years of study and practical involvement with the programme. While recognizing CAMPFIRE’s success in creating economic incentives for conservation (at the council level) it poses two crucial questions. How successful has CAMPFIRE been in reforming tenure so that farmers on communal lands become genuine stewards of the natural resources in those areas? And, how successful has CAMPFIRE been in making wildlife management a part of the household economy in programme areas? The findings reveal that CAMPFIRE’s achievements vary greatly, depending on the form of the natural resource base and population densities. Contrary to the CAMPFIRE myth, Murombedzi argues that in many areas, wildlife conservation remains dependent on a top-down and coercive approach, albeit with rural district

4 Such ‘mixes’ may represent compromises between different social forces, but that does not mean that they should be viewed negatively as a ‘fudge’ that seeks to avoid the taking of decisions. Norman Uphoff (1992) writes of the need to go beyond analyses of concepts and action based purely on the basis of ‘either . . . or . . .’ choices. More powerful concepts and more effective action will often derive from analyses that focus on ‘both . . . and . . .’.

5 Spinage (1998) has defended the ‘total protection’ approach but his premise — that science, and thus conservation, is totally separable from political and social issues — mean that his work has value only in terms of showing that some conservationists place the existence of wildlife above the existence of Africans.

6 Selecting three case studies from our research project was difficult and has inevitably led to ‘biases’ in the materials presented here. Not least, the presentation of two Southern African cases encourages a focus on the ideas, policies and practices that dominate in that region. For a fuller coverage the reader is referred to Hulme and Murphree (forthcoming a).
councils (rather than the central government) seeking to restrict community-level land use preferences. Can CAMPFIRE be regarded as successful, he argues, when the prime uses for the community level benefits it generates are investment in agriculture and livestock, i.e. uses that compete for land with wildlife? Radical reforms will be needed to the CAMPFIRE programme and the white-dominated safari hunting industry if wildlife management is to create a significant and sustainable flow of benefits for poorer Zimbabweans.

Jones’ paper traces the evolution of a community-level approach to wildlife conservation in the Kunene region of Namibia. This has been an experiment that has both influenced the evolution of national policy and, in its turn, has been shaped by new national policies and legislation. The study shows the ways in which the economic incentives created by devolving proprietorship over wildlife and tourism have led to people in this area re-evaluating the relative roles of wildlife and agriculture (domestic livestock and crops) in local development. They have also propelled communities into direct relationships with the market and been the impetus for new forms of community-level association to manage these new relationships. The study also points out, however, that economics are not all that matters. The people of this region place a relatively high intrinsic value on wildlife existence and so the conservation of wildlife is also partly dependent on retaining these non-instrumental values and passing them on to future generations. The paper reveals, however, that promoting community-based wildlife management is not an easy option. Not only have difficult natural resource issues to be worked out (e.g. how to integrate competing land uses such as agriculture, livestock and wildlife) but factionalism within ‘the community’ threatens the progress of such initiatives. Ultimately such conflicts must be resolved within the community, but the role of external parties (government agencies, NGOs, wildlife user associations) in seeking to assist in conflict resolution will be a key variable in shaping the long-term achievements of Namibia’s emerging policies.

The third paper, by Infield and Adams shifts the focus to East Africa and to moist, montane environments of evergreen forest. The case that they analyse, Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda, is toward the more conservative end of the new conservation with a focus on park outreach and park neighbours.7 It concerns an area of great conservation interest, because of the threatened status of the mountain gorilla as a species, and of great development interest, as the gorilla lies at the heart of Uganda’s hopes to develop ‘tourist circuits’ that will give it a bigger share of what is now proclaimed as the world’s largest industry — tourism. At Mgahinga, Uganda’s Community Conservation policy operates in an ‘entirely top down’ fashion. While the people who neighbour the Park’s boundaries can now access an increased share of Park-generated benefits they have no say over Park management. While recent policy changes and practical actions are a step in the right direction, in terms of assisting desperately poor people to improve their livelihoods, the vast majority of the benefits of the Park accrue at the international level (the existence value of gorillas, foreign tour companies and foreign tourists) and the national level (the Ugandan Wildlife Authority, tour companies and associated business). The Park’s Community Conservation Project has ‘. . . staunched . . . resentment’ in an area which had previously seen very bad relationships between local people and conservation agencies and their

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7 In East Africa recent conservation policy changes have concentrated much more on park outreach than has been the case in Southern Africa (Barrow et al., forthcoming).
staff. However, it is heavily dependent on donor finances and tourist revenues (which fluctuate greatly). The limited achievements that the project has produced, in both conservation and livelihood terms, are unlikely to be sustainable without continued external support.

4 CONCLUSION

The nature of change in contemporary conservation in Africa has commonly been presented as a shift from the state to the community. This is part of what has been happening but, as this article has pointed out, these changes are much more complex. While the labels of community conservation and community-based conservation have become widely used this is, to a significant degree, because of the positive image generated by the idea of ‘community’ rather than because of their accuracy. Community ‘… unlike all other terms of social organization … seems never to be used unfavourably’ (Shore, 1993, p. 99). By using the term ‘community’ politicians, planners and activists can attempt (consciously or unconsciously) to move conservation policy and practice into the realms of motherhood and apple pie: what reasonable person could object to community conservation?

In truth, what is emerging is a ‘new conservation’ which both challenges fortress conservation and works alongside it. This new conservation is a much looser and flexible construct than fortress conservation and the ways in which the concepts on which it is built interrelate demand careful consideration both for theory and for practice. It is not a simple case of ‘out with the old and in with the new’ as ideas about narrative and counter-narrative in African environmental policy suggest (Roe, 1995). Rather, the new conservation and fortress conservation are colonizing each other in the ‘… both … and’ frameworks that Uphoff (1992) sees as operating when social change and policy shifts are occurring.

Theoretically, there is much work ahead to think through how to describe and understand models of conservation that can engage with the interplay of state, society (or, at least, local society) and the market. Fortress conservation’s model — ‘the state is best’ — has proved invalid. But, is the new conservation’s model — ‘local society is best plus market is best’ — any more valid? The answer must be ‘no’. Our theory needs to move on to appreciating that conservation is an issue of governance. It is about the roles and relationships of the state, of society (of which communities are elements) and of markets. The conceptual propositions that underpin recent polemics on conservation — state is worst, community is best, market is best — have changed our thinking and practice but they do not add up to a cohesive theoretical framework for analysis or prescription. Ultimately, the achievement of conservation goals in Africa does not rest on the identification of the right actor (i.e. state or community or market) or the right policy. Rather, it requires a set of governance processes that allow all three actors to operate in the fields of conservation and development while being accountable to the other actors and that are flexible enough to permit relationships, policy and practice to evolve as environmental, economic and social conditions change.

8 For a discussion of how the concept of governance might influence ideas and practices of conservation see Hulme and Murphree (forthcoming b).
Practically, these studies reveal that the new conservation is not a quick fix for conservation or sustainable development in Africa, nor is it a blueprint that can be switched from country to country. This may be problematic for policy makers, and particularly for donor agencies which commonly have to pretend that an aid investment can eradicate poverty, conserve the environment and promote economic growth within a few years. Adapting a finding from Agrawal’s (1997, p. 37) work it must be recognized that the new conservation is not about providing guarantees, it is about experimenting on the basis of a set of appealing ideas. If ‘… conservation is about handling change, and about the transition from past to future’ (Adams, 1996, pp. 96–97) then the new conservation provides the basis for a set of experiments, through which conservation policies and practice in Africa can more effectively respond to the transition from its unsatisfactory past to its uncertain future.

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