



## Cultural Values: a Forgotten Strategy for Building Community Support for Protected Areas in Africa

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Since the 1980s, initiatives to encourage rural people to become an integral part of conservation efforts have attracted wide support (McNeely 1992; Ghimire 1994). Strategies for achieving this participation in Africa have often focused on the economic link between local communities and protected areas. The role of cultural values in building support for conservation has been noted (McNeely & Miller 1984; Brownrigg 1985) but has been largely ignored in practice. Interest has remained rhetorical, and few initiatives exist that actively seek to integrate values relevant to local communities into conservation programs and the management of Africa's protected areas. This is perhaps surprising, because in the West the relationship between culture, history, conservation, and protected areas has been the subject of considerable research and scholarship (Nash 1982; Adams 1996; Neumann 1998).

The emphasis on economic incentives for conservation stems, in part, from the linking of conservation and development (World Conservation Union et al. 1980; World Commission on Environment and Development 1987; World Conservation Union 1991). Although poverty and environmental degradation often are closely related, most of Africa's protected areas do not and almost certainly will not contribute significantly to reducing poverty. Conservation initiatives must recognize economic realities. But the current focus on economic incentives for involving communities in conservation efforts results, to a considerable extent, from the theory that market forces will conserve and protect the environment, lessening the need for government intervention. This assertion, a product of "neoliberal" economics, has strongly influenced political and popular thinking in recent decades and has profoundly affected international development aid practices, including many internationally funded

conservation programs in developing countries (Struhaker 1998). In poor countries, economic approaches can appear especially attractive, and their presentation as humanitarian in intention (Holdgate & Munro 1995) has guaranteed them almost universal acceptance.

The intention to make wildlife and protected areas "pay for themselves" has stimulated a range of "community conservation" initiatives aimed at building a local constituency for conservation. These include protected-area outreach programs with an emphasis on sharing revenues, resources, and opportunities with local communities; collaborative management in which governments and communities join to manage protected areas for sustainable production; and community-based wildlife management aimed at economic development rather than conservation (Hulme & Murphree 1999). Integrated conservation and development projects also attempt to reduce pressures on protected areas by supporting local economic development. Calculation of the monetary worth of wildlife, nature, and landscape through contingent valuation methods also contributes to the commercialization of conservation and the downplaying of cultural values.

Despite the range of initiatives and investment of donor funds, it has proved difficult to provide tangible benefits from conservation to local communities in Africa. Although the political and economic regimes of many developing countries aggravate the difficulties of channeling benefits to communities, most protected areas do not realize sufficient revenue to offset the costs to communities of retaining them (Mason 1995; Norton-Griffiths & Southey 1995; Emerton 1998). Hundreds of Africa's conservation areas are unknown, inaccessible, and lacking in charismatic species or dramatic landscapes to attract tourists. Even where these exist in abundance (e.g., Uganda's Mgahinga Gorilla National Park), tourism revenues are not sufficient to meet community demands and management costs and to subsidize operations in other equally important, although less attractive, conservation areas (Infeld & Adams 1999). Although nature

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tourism earns substantial revenues for some of Africa's protected areas, few benefits trickle down to local communities. The competitive, entrepreneurial nature of the tourist industry is not conducive to the delivery of sufficient financial incentives to poor rural people living around Africa's protected areas for these communities to choose conservation, ecotourism and donor projects notwithstanding (Hackel 1999).

Linking conservation with development to create economic benefits may lead to uses of protected areas and lands around them that are incompatible with conservation (Wells et al. 1992; Noss 1997). Economics can as easily work against conservation as for it. Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program, one of Africa's best-known community wildlife management projects, stimulates agricultural development as landowners choose to invest earnings from wildlife in expanding their farms (Murombedzi 1999). Demands for resources or revenue are likely to increase as human populations and expectations increase, pressuring conservation authorities to increase production. If greater earnings can be achieved by compromising conservation objectives, communities may argue for this (Hackel 1999) and may be supported by governments.

That democratic advances will promote conservation is uncertain (Midlarsky 1998; Hackel 1999). Indeed, as democratic institutions strengthen, support for wildlife conservation may become a political liability, and communities antagonistic toward protected areas may find stronger political support. Many of Africa's protected areas will need determined government support if they are to survive. The shaky foundations on which community support for them is being built must be strengthened. Designing and managing protected areas to reflect values relevant to local and national communities as well as to perform conventional conservation functions will help governments explain support for protected areas to their people.

Are there other ways Africa's governments can justify to a largely unsupportive populace the conservation of wildlife and protected areas? Managing them to reflect locally important cultural values may help. Work in Namibia (Jones 1999), Tanzania (Kangwana & Ole Mako 1998), and elsewhere suggests that culture can provide incentives for communities to conserve wildlife. Culture can be thought of as "systems of symbols" (Ingold 1992). People live in environments imbued with symbolic significance because landscapes are cultural constructions, not simply biological diversity or physical terrain (Greider & Garkovich 1994; Neumann 1998). Different peoples perceive nature through different values that influence both intrinsic preferences and ways of "interpreting it, to oneself and others" (Ingold 1992). Recognizing values in nature as "... changeable, even arbitrary" (Peterson 1999) may allow the development of more flexible thinking about protected-area management.

Resources within Uganda's Mount Elgon National Park, for example, have an irreplaceable role in the lives of surrounding *Bagisu* communities, but regulations prevent legal access to them. Smoked bamboo shoots (*Arundinaria alpina*) are essential to biannual circumcision ceremonies, powerful spiritual events for the *Bagisu* people. "You [park authorities] can take away whatever you like, but you can't take away our [bamboo]" (Scott 1998:49; quoting a local government official). Ancient trees (*Podocarpus* spp.) mark the sites for these ceremonies. In another example, the *Bagisu* place special beehives in the forest during periods of social crisis. Ritual harvesting of the honey by clan elders perpetuates links with tribal ancestors because spirits are believed to control the bees. Allowing or even promoting these activities could create a powerful link between the *Bagisu* and the park.

Providing access to protected-area resources is often discussed in economic terms (Wild & Mutebi 1996). More powerful incentives might be created, however, if access was presented and understood in cultural terms. For example, the diverse cuisines of many West African cultures make wide use of wild foods, both animal and plant, which are increasingly restricted to protected areas. Emphasizing the link between conservation and the continued availability of these food items might stimulate local and national interest in protected areas and conservation. Much poaching in protected areas is driven by economic need. Some, however, certainly stems from cultural needs. Demands by Zulus to hunt in South Africa's Central Complex Reserve had cultural origins (Infield 1986), demonstrating their continued interest in the traditional annual hunts of the chiefs and their warriors.

A recent examination of community conservation in Africa led to the conclusion that "... only a vast improvement in the lives of rural Africans will ultimately produce a more secure future for the continent's wildlife" (Hackel 1999). This is unlikely to be achieved soon and not before many of Africa's protected areas fall before demands to realize promised economic returns. But it is not only through economic contributions that wildlife and protected areas can have value for local people. Promoting conservation in the context of local culture would endow protected areas with significance that an emphasis on biological diversity, landscape, or economics does not. Promoting cultural values would also provide a counterbalance to economic pressures on protected areas. This is not to suggest that culture is static, but if conservation is about managing change in dynamic systems (Adams 1996), then evolving cultures can also find reflection in protected-area management. The need for protection will not disappear, but managing protected areas to reflect local values may help build support for and reduce resistance to them and allow governments to justify and explain conservation in terms that have real meaning to local communities.

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