

A CASE FOR CONSERVANCIES??

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INTRODUCTION

There are feelings in some quarters that Conservancies on private land do not always enjoy the recognition and support that they could, either from public or authorities. I suspect that one of the reasons for this relates to perceptions and “traditional” views regarding what conservation ought to be. Perceptions and views largely moulded by media, films, marketing of “pristine” Africa to tourists and preoccupation with large wild animals. These views in turn have been reinforced by visitor expectations in our National Parks and Provincial Conservation areas, leaving the impression that conservancies on private land do not seriously merit consideration for even approaching half the job of conserving, if at all. How can you conserve an area with people, dwellings, houses, livestock, crops etc? What about the wild animals? Also, from some conservation authorities’ point of view, private landowners are not always a priority, and some so-called conservation initiatives on private land, especially in the case of certain game ranches, cause more controversy than they contribute.

It is one of the aims of this conference to ensure that the role of conservancies is more widely understood and supported. So in this talk we will address some current factors influencing trends in conservation and question some persistent notions resulting from the historical approach to conservation. In the light of the realities facing us in South Africa, we look at sharing responsibilities for ensuring that the conservation objectives of the Constitution, National and Provincial legislation are met.

CONSERVATION IN THE CURRENT AGE

The world is changing...

We are constantly reminded that we live in a rapidly changing environment, globally and nationally. The ruling economic paradigm driving globalisation has been termed the “neo-liberal” approach. Seemingly this translates into more and more faith in Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of market-driven forces, which in turn is interpreted in some quarters as indicating that all spheres of human activity, including conservation, need to be more in tune with market realities and business values. So we read and hear for example, that “if it pays it stays”, and “Conservation through utilisation”.

We see our own National agency, SANParks, and several provincial agencies moving towards commercialisation, outsourcing, concessioning and the like. We see Game Reserves such as Madikwe developed primarily as economic engines in impoverished rural areas, with conservation a secondary spin-off. (However, as an aside, whether or not market forces actually rule is a moot point. For example, protectionist policies in international trade in agriculture still dominate the scene in many developed countries. The combined annual subsidies for agriculture in the OECD countries are apparently more than five times the total international development aid bill. Moreover, when it comes to the conservation of living organisms with which we share the planet, other forces come into play, including non-material, spiritual, religious, aesthetics etc.)

But perceptions of conservation are still dominated by big beasts...

It nevertheless remains a fact that the “charismatic mega-herbivores” still dominate public and other perceptions of what conservation should be doing. Preoccupation with the big five as well as the drive for increasing revenue from protected areas, fills our state and private reserves with tourists, while smaller niche market products develop around areas with high biodiversity and scenic value but lacking the glamour of the big and hairy beasts. So are these of lesser conservation value? Do conservancies which contribute to the sustainable use and conservation of species, genetic diversity and ecological systems have a lesser value?

Conservation Biology

What does the science of conservation biology tell us about what we should conserve? Conservation biology grapples with concepts such as “driver and passenger species”. There are those who have been so bold as to suggest that it is impossible to conserve all species, that in some cases the ‘sacrifice’ of species is justifiable in terms of greater societal benefit, and we should concentrate on landscape-level ecological processes. Others err on the side of caution. Ehrlich has likened the loss of each species as akin to losing a rivet from the shell of an aircraft: - when the key rivet is lost...

Of course value judgements and opinions abound, and no-one can really claim omniscience in this regard, not even conservation scientists. But we do know that there are indications that in some systems we can distinguish between drivers and passengers (would the system collapse if the Brenton Blue Butterfly became extinct?), keystone and umbrella species which influence other species and so on. And that few systems today contain the full array of species and interactions that prevailed historically.

And when we start applying these realities to examples of private conservancies, we may well find that they play key roles in ensuring not only biodiversity conservation, but in ensuring ecosystem function and the supply of ecological goods and services such as regulated flow of water of good quality; maintenance of breeding habitat for birds; source

of propagules for dispersion etc etc. So not preserving “Eden” in its perceived totality, but certainly conserving systems at their current levels of structure and function.

But conservation is about ‘Natural Systems’....

Of course most attention was and to an extent, still is, focussed on formally conserved areas proclaimed under national and provincial legislation and managed by state agencies, namely SANParks and the nine Provincial Conservation Agencies. Simply, these are the icons of conservation which have shaped our perceptions of what conservation is all about. So let’s subject them to a bit of a reality check.

Our flagship National Park, Kruger, and others, display certain inherited characteristics moulded by the notion that “pristine nature” and “wilderness” merit protection from the ravages of advancing civilisation as well as the harmful practices of rural people. This perception of a “human-less” wilderness historically shaped much of our conservation thinking and may be a reason why conservancies where people live and farm and do other things, are not regarded as “mainstream” to coin a current cliché. But is this valid in the southern African context?

We know, for example, that the Makuleke people from the northern part of KNP, between the Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers were moved from this land against their will. One of the main reasons was the desire to extend the boundaries of the KNP to the Limpopo and to include the biodiversity of this area in the Park. After removal, it is somewhat ironic that this area became regarded as “pristine wilderness” with important endemics and high biodiversity, despite having been occupied, cultivated, grazed by livestock and used in other ways by people for centuries. Archaeologists inform us that the earliest record for livestock in the Cape is at least 1700 years before present. Before the advent of livestock, man certainly set fire to the veld, hunted, gathered, harvested plants, wood etc.

Thulamela, in Kruger, is well known as a site of human occupancy, as is Mapungubwe in the Dongola Park along the border of Botswana and Zimbabwe. We are talking about relatively large civilisations over 600 years ago. Lesser known are the literally hundreds of old village and kraal sites scattered throughout the KNP and adjacent private reserves, primarily along major rivers. For example, along the Sabi River, in what is now the privately owned Sabi Sand Wildtuin, evidence of old kraals still remain 100 years after indigenous tribes were removed, thereby enhancing the vegetation mosaic and contributing to the biodiversity and ecological resilience of the area (and providing the evidence for Land Claims...).

The simple point is that man has been an integral part of most so-called “pristine” natural systems for a long time. And, if we think about it, still is. We still have (and accept) numerous villages in the Kruger National Park (although Skukuza would be called a town, not village by most criteria), as long as they are peopled by “qualified” uniformed staff and paying guests; the uniformed staff

- erect fences,
- build tar roads across the landscape,
- provide waterholes (and later remove many of them),
- make firebreaks,
- burn rectangular blocks of vegetation on a rotational basis for decades based on “scientific knowledge”, and then, when dogma dies, partially “leave it to nature”,
- then cull different species at different times, leave them at other times ...

And yet the majority of visitors at least, regard Kruger as being “natural”.

Consider a typical National Park in, for example, the United Kingdom. I choose this as an example because the African legacy of National Parks was largely moulded and shaped by colonial powers.

The North York Moors National Park, has areas of old forest interspersed with new growth, fields of crops, hedgerows, livestock, villages scattered about etc. The Park Management Plan is included as part of the general Town and Country Development Plan, prepared in consultation with land owners in the Park. In fact, most land in the Park is privately owned. The Park authority provides incentives and compensation for agreed works and management actions (from Borrini-Feyerabend, G 2003. *Draft Report of IUCN Theme on Indigenous Local Communities, Equity and Protected Areas*. IUCN Draft Report, Gland, Switzerland).

Similar to many of our conservancies in fact. So how should we be working together?

SHARING THE RESPONSIBILITY: STATE AND CITIZENS

Increasingly we are told that the state alone cannot bear the costs of conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem processes. In South Africa, the SANParks budget has been declining in real terms. The Kumleben report although now old painted a somewhat grim picture in certain provincial conservation bodies. Much has been done since that report but the fact remains that the state has clear priorities aimed at redressing the backlog in societal welfare and basic needs. Increasingly, state agencies are expected to introduce and implement innovative means of increasing efficiency and cost effectiveness. The recent round of commercialisation and concessioning in some of our major National Parks, including shops and tourism facilities in, for example, Kruger is well known if not universally popular. We are increasingly exposed to the mantra of “If it pays it stays” approach to conservation, as mentioned above.

Of course there are merits in this approach to increased efficiency, as well as some possible pitfalls. Some argue that the conservation initiative could be compromised, that, for example, SANParks will “cherry pick” the potentially viable conserved areas at the expense of less viable biodiversity hotspots with high conservation but low commercial

value, leaving these to the struggling provinces or excluding them from the conservation estate.

On the other hand, the perceived role of the private sector in conservation is increasingly publicised by way of statements, mainly emanating from the game ranching industry, that some “16 million ha of private land is under conservation”; that private land owners collectively conserve more land than the formal state conservation bodies, and what is more, do it at no cost to the state. Why is this met with such little enthusiasm?

Game ranches and conservancies...

To put it bluntly, a game ranch is not necessarily a conserved piece of land in any sense of the word, never mind a narrow purist view. Stocking veld with a wide array of indigenous species, with scant regard for stocking rates, suitability of habitat for species stocked, ratios between different feeding classes etc does lead to poor animal performance and decline in veld condition. Added to this are genetic considerations. Many game ranches were stocked with small founder populations, often from external gene pools (eg Namibian springbok in the karoo) and inbreeding of these closed populations periodically manifests. It is likely this will worsen over time. Stocking species well outside their normal area of occurrence is more of an SPCA issue:-have you ever seen blesbok suffering under a mopane tree in midsummer in the far north of Limpopo province? Or seen mass die-off of nyala in western North West Province during a wet spell in July? Then also the preoccupation in some sectors with freaks of nature with high curiosity and market value: white and black springbok, black impala and even red wildebeest support market driven theories of supply and demand but fly in the face of conservation theory and accepted practice. We won't talk about the highly publicised cases of abuse during capture and transport, nor canned hunting.

But we can understand why authorities and public are not always happy with the game ranching industry. I suspect that the conservancy movement suffers by association, whether real or imagined. Added to this is a climate of mistrust. Why do people want conservancies on their land?? In answer to this question in Natal many years ago, most landowners cited increased security. So what? Do we have the right to question motives when the end result is a net benefit to society. Some people conserve because they like nice things. Others because they are paid to do so. Others because of religious or spiritual convictions. So what...

Moving Beyond Boundaries and sharing responsibility

There is a happy synchronicity in the timing and title of this conference with that of the World Parks Congress to be held for the first time in South Africa, in Durban next month. “Stewardship beyond Boundaries” resonates quite elegantly with the WPC theme “Benefits beyond boundaries”.

Implicit in these two titles is the notion that there are both responsibilities (for stewardship) as well as benefits associated with conservation, and that conservation stretches beyond the physical and mental confines of artificial boundaries, be they fortress-type fences or historical cadastral constructs. Importantly, there is also growing recognition that conservation stretches across land under different tenure (state, private and communal).

In terms of the latter point, it is very relevant that there are strong initiatives to obtain formal recognition of new categories within the current IUCN Protected Area Categorisation system, at the World Parks Congress. In essence, these are

- Co-Managed Protected Areas, in which state and communities share responsibility, and
- Community Managed Conservation Areas, where community managed areas are afforded full recognition and support, as are the other IUCN categories of conserved areas (for example, current IUCN Category II is that of a National Park).

This is done for several reasons, including acknowledgement of the decreasing capacity of states to carry the conservation responsibility alone, but also, importantly, the increasing recognition of the contribution which communities (and this includes private landowners) have made and can make to conservation. AND recognition that conservation can be best achieved across artificial Park boundaries. The international literature is full of examples of conserved areas where the state has played little or no role, including sacred sites, private reserves and the like.

But how well is biodiversity conserved in formally protected areas? A look at the conservation estate suggests that this is not the case. In fact, a disproportionate amount of protected areas are in savanna regions, (home to the charismatic big 5), while other major biomes, especially grasslands, remain relatively poorly represented in state protected areas. It is in cases like this that conservancies can and do contribute to conservation of landscape level ecosystem processes, species and genetic diversity.

SOME LAST THOUGHTS...

Whether part of natural, near natural or partially transformed landscapes, identification of key elements of conservation-worthy systems, and focussed inputs towards ensuring sustainability, are critical inputs to the total conservation effort. Wetlands, streams, rivers, patches of undisturbed bankenveld in the highveld areas, pockets of cycads in the eastern escarpment, breeding sites for rare migratory birds etc etc etc. What about erosion, controlled road run-off, fire breaks, storm water control, appropriate tree planting, invader control, pylon siting, aesthetics etc? The question is whether the state effort can do without conservancies. How the parties work together is what you are going to talk about today hopefully.

Perhaps we should more aggressively explore innovative partnerships between land owners, state authorities and rural dwellers in general (and there are examples in some provinces). And let's not shy away from creative initiatives (for example, elements of the Working for Water programme) aimed at conserving important systems, be they catchments, wetlands, breeding refugia or whatever. Remember that a simple intervention often has drastic effects: in some catchments repairing roads and tracks, the major source of runoff and sediments, can have major impacts on streamflow quality and quantity and longer lifetimes of impoundments. I am aware that many decry public works programmes as non-sustainable, flying in the face of market forces, socialist interventions etc. This need not be so if skills provision and establishment of small businesses is part of the thrust. And it's been done in many places before. And our massive rural unemployment demands action. Most, if not all, so-called developed nations have faced similar challenges in the past:-

“In this nation I see millions of its citizens — a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life.

I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago.

I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions.

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out. We are determined to make every citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern; and we will never regard any faithful law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little”.

Not the words of Luthuli, Sobukwe, Mandela or other heroes of South Africa's struggle. In fact, the words of Franklin D Roosevelt before initiating “New Deal” public works programmes when confronted with the reality of the great depression of the 1930's.

