Parks, politics and history: Conservation dilemmas in Africa

Mahesh Rangarajan

Visiting Assistant Professor in South Asian Environmental History, South Asia Program, Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA and independent scholar and political analyst, 24 Samachar Apartments, Mayur Vihar Phase I, Delhi 110 091.

Correspondence Address:
Mahesh Rangarajan
Visiting Assistant Professor in South Asian Environmental History, South Asia Program, Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA and independent scholar and political analyst, 24 Samachar Apartments, Mayur Vihar Phase I, Delhi 110 091.

Source of Support: None, Conflict of Interest: None

THE CONSERVATION DILEMMAS of Africa are a pressing concern for all. But in recent years, works of history as well as of science have questioned older stereotypes. The Victorian idea was one of a continent fit for conquest, carved up by various European powers whose rule (or misrule) left a mark in more ways than one, not only on the peoples but on the landscape and wildlife. In recent years, the Southern and Central African region has come to be better known for new and innovative experiments that try to place conservation on a cooperative basis. But such an enterprise requires an engagement with history as well as with science (see Anderson and Grove 1987a; Beinart 1989). The past matters as it can illustrate how the present came about. By knowing better what choices were made in the past, when and why, the dilemmas of the present can be seen in a more holistic way. Equally important is a critical appraisal not of the biological sciences in a narrow sense but of the role played by scientists and the knowledge they generate. Since conservation is as much about relating to people as it is about plants, animals, landscapes and soils, there is no escaping the wider question. What has been the experience of scientists who try to intervene in real life situations and devise models or approaches to conservation that can work?

Southern Africa looks especially interesting to a student of the politics of conservation in South Asia. Both regions had a history of colonial rule, but in ecological terms there were significant contrasts as well as similarities. Both were major trophy hunting grounds by the late nineteenth century. But in South Asia, it was the creation of large forest reserves for timber and the expansion of canal networks that were at the heart of colonial remaking of the landscape. In Anglophone and Belgian-ruled Africa, the emphasis was more on soil conservation, stock control, game protection and hunting. All were pursued using a range of means, some of them draconian. No wonder that nationalist movements in Eastern Africa often entailed resistance to the forced labour that was recruited for public works. But the cutting edge of statist conservation lay in South Africa. It is in the fitness of things that a look at recent works...
Jane Carruthers is a pioneering historian of South African conservation. Not surprisingly, her monograph on the political and social history of Kruger Park begins by explicitly acknowledging how famous the place is. She presciently observes how for several people, South Africa is epitomised both by the former system of apartheid and the Kruger National Park. However, unlike apartheid, the Park is a compelling emblem; nature conservation is seen as intrinsically benign. But the story is not quite so simple. For tourists the vast 19,000 sq. km. Park simply showcases wilderness. Watching wildlife from a gasoline-driven automobile is an innovation that dates back to the 1920s, but until recently, the experience reinforced an alliance of English and Afrikaans speaking white settlers. The railroad had been an ally of the creation of America's first national park: the internal combustion engine played a similar role fifty years later in Africa. Such an act of creating a park was not merely a gesture to 'save' nature, but to redefine who owned it. Exclusion of black Africans culminated in the birth of apartheid in 1948, a political system founded on racial distinctions and unequal rights. Kruger, a symbol of the triumph of the camera over the culture of sport, was simultaneously a central emblem of apartheid for decades.

The idea was that the park for white tourists from all parts of South Africa would showcase the land 'as the Voortrekkers saw it'. Paul Kruger was first reinvented as a pioneer of preservation; later Henrik Verwoerd who presided over South Africa as State President in the 1960s was credited with the creation of the Augrabies National Park. Kruger was not just a national park: it was part of a much larger political drama.

In a later era, as the apartheid regime came under increasing pressure from within and without, the Park and other wildlife reserves were used as symbols to try and defuse criticisms. By preserving the wild in a large park, the white racist regime killed two birds with one stone. It staked a claim to being a responsible benefactor of immense natural wealth for the world at large. It also won legitimacy in Western eyes. By the 1970s, the parks enabled white South Africa to woo support overseas amidst wider anti-apartheid boycotts in the international community. For instance, the 1001 Club of the World Wildlife Fund launched as a fund raising campaign by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands required a contribution of $10,000 as an entry fee. The number of white South Africans who signed up were 300 times the number of Americans who did so, in proportion to their total numbers. Many appear to have been from the secret white supremacist brotherhood, the Broederbond. Few other international fora were willing to admit white South Africans (Bonner 1993). At the same time, the recovery of numbers of rare herbivores enabled a form of 'zoological diplomacy'. White rhinos from Natal's parks were sent to white settler-ruled Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and two independent African states, Kenya and Swaziland (Sparks 1973).

The idea of setting aside game reserves and national parks arose at a very specific point in time. It was preceded by mass slaughter that was integral to the process of conquest and subjugation of the land and the people. There was no perfect harmony before the conquest by the Dutch and the subsequent entry of the British. Yet, the first major mammal extinctions took place as a consequence of the coming of modern technologies of warfare and hunting and the inability of two large herbivores (the bluebok and the quagga) in the Cape Colony to adapt to the major changes in the land (Silverberg 1973: 97-106). Early conservation concerns had centred less on wildlife and more on forest conservation (Grove 1987: 97-106). The attitudes towards wildlife itself underwent considerable shifts over time. Wild animals were a source of revenue in the initial stages, with no limits on bags or a thought to the morrow. Hunters like William Cornwallis Harris, who had also fought and hunted in India, made his hunting exploits the stuff of early best sellers. Hides, horns and ivory became to be a major source of revenue in the late nineteenth century. Simultaneously, the agrarian frontier moved north, displacing 'native' pastoralists and large herds of wild ungulates. The first reserves were created in the 1890s when there were fears of the all out and final extinction of the game. It was in this context that the Sabi Game Reserve came to be of prominence. It was not the first such area but it was the one that lasted.

Carruthers shows how the creation of reserves was also a device to assert competing land claims. Land grab was easier to justify when cloaked in the garb of conservation: the Pongola area was protected to forestall British land claims. But there was more to it all than mere annexation ambitions. A section of white settlers became advocates of protection. In their view the real threat to wildlife arose from another group. In 1903, writing to the Colonial Secretary, the local Game Protection Association warned that, 'The destruction of game by the natives . . . enables a large number to live by this means who would otherwise have to maintain themselves by honest labour' (Carruthers 1995: 32). The absence of direct interests of settlement in the area by white landowners and the lobbying by Abel Chapman eventually led to the appointment of a warden and curbs on hunting. James Stevenson Hamilton was to serve as the warden from 1902 untill 1946: a man in command on the spot who was often able to do as he liked. One era had given way to another.

While there is little doubt the curbs hit non-whites more seriously, a section of settlers was also affected by the new rules. There were protests, for instance that the area was now a 'lion-breeding centre', the big cats being seen as marauders of domestic livestock. Despite many competing pressures and claims, the reserve survived unlike many others in South Africa (Beinart and Coates 1995). In 1924, politicians like J.M. Hertzog explicitly championed the renaming of the Sabi Game Reserve on the Mozambique border after Paul Kruger. The creation of a national park was not a simple victory of 'good versus evil', but was part of complex political changes at the time.

Other voices were all too easily ignored. These included the story of people evicted from the tract or subject to labour levies and
Carruthers deftly demonstrates the evolution of the Afrikaner notion of conservation from the 1940s onwards. Black Africans were depicted as cruel and destructive; the Parks Board claimed to be nature's voice. Initially, black African settlements were allowed to stay but in 1905, over 3,000 were evicted from a now much larger Sabi Game Reserve. Subsequently there was a decades-long struggle by the Makuleke community against expansion of the Park. They lost out in 1969 and were relocated. Such dislocations were part and parcel of highly intrusive, and racially skewed land use allocations in the apartheid era. Those living off the land were not the only ones who felt the brunt of exclusion. There were even segregated camps for white and black tourists with far worse facilities and services for the latter.

White managers were not of course homogenous, with major rifts over how to manage the Park. The evolution of wildlife biology in the 1950s in the white universities of South Africa led to significant differences of opinion on how best to deal with carnivores in the Kruger. In much of Southern Africa, the first generation of park officials was made up of former military officers. This was the case of East Africa's Game Wardens too: George Adamson, Bruce Kinloch, David Sheldrick and J.P. Ionides in British East Africa (Adamson 1968; Kinloch 1972). Ironically, scientists revived the old policy of killing off carnivores. Lion hunting halted since 1926, was renewed in order to safeguard the rare sable antelope. The idea of 'management by intervention', a hallmark of the South African model of conservation crystallised in this period. It was no coincidence that white settlers had founded several smaller reserves to save species like the mountain zebra and bontebok from extinction. A Kruger warden told a visiting British biologist in the 1970s, that the Park itself was not a natural unit but the result of human ingenuity. To save it meant to intervene and actively so. To the visitor it looked more like a 'gigantic game ranch': complete with human-made watering points, inoculations for rare ungulates, tranquiliser guns, animal relocations and border fences. Far from being wilderness free of human intervention, the area, its plants and animals have been re-natured in myriad ways. The question has often been: Who does the reshaping and why? (Douglas Hamilton and Douglas Hamilton 1990: 68).

But the Park was an artefact of politics as much as of wildlife managers. No wonder that the end of apartheid in the 1990s led to strident calls for its abolition in the new democratic South Africa. It is a measure of the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela and his successors, that these calls have not won a response. But even as they strive to make the Park the heritage of all South Africans irrespective of colour, status and income, there is no escaping from its troubled history. Older concepts have resurfaced in new form. The notion that game can be cropped as a resource is now advocated for the region and various parts of the world. The recovery of the rhino and elephant under managed conditions is seen not as a leftover of the apartheid era, but as a positive contribution for conservation everywhere. Some advocates have even favoured it as an ideal model for other species and continents.

Interestingly, the idea of commercialised hunts and game culls can also be seen as a product of the unique mix of large blocs of landed estates and exclusive land ownership in South Africa's recent past (Tsaas Rolies 1998). A bloc of Southern African states had advocated highly intrusive forms of management with culling as standard practice as a conservation model in the 1980s. The same nation states continue to champion such an approach after the end of the apartheid era too (Ellis 1994). More important is the notion of Peace Parks along the border, and Kruger is the centrepiece of a major initiative with South Africa's adjacent nation states (Duffy 1997). The legacy of the apartheid past has not vanished but the new socio-political order based on universal franchise and a multi-party polity faces a difficult task. It has to remodel conservation while breaking from its draconian past.

Carruthers' book is a highly skilled work of history. She lucidly pieces together key moments in South Africa's history and the conflicts that need to be understood in the search for a just future. A different study by geographer Roderick P. Neumann takes up the 137 sq.

km. Arusha National Park in Tanzania but focuses much more on local displacements and perceptions. Arusha's past intersected with Kruger's in the 1920s, a decisive decade in Africa's wildlife. Eastern Africa remained a largely peasant-based society, with a much thinner overlay of white settlers. Even the politics of hunting, parks and game was much more closely tied to the changing fashions at a pan-imperial level than was ever the case in South Africa (Anderson and Grove 1987b; Mackenzie 1987). When Tanzania gained independence in 1961, there were significant continuities in government policy with the late colonial era, especially in the field of conservation. What was earlier the white man's game became a potential source of foreign exchange. So much so, that the country has national parks and equivalent reserves extending over one-fourth of its landmass. This is far more than the 3 per cent set aside for parks in South Africa.

The British took control of the region after 1918, and were keenly aware of the new conservationist initiatives in South Africa. Tanzania had been a German colony prior to that. While German concerns had centred more on forestry, the Mt Meru State forests were re-gazetted as a Complete Game Reserve in 1928. The presence of the Merus in the region dated back over three centuries. There had been conflicts earlier as between Merus and the Arusha peoples, but European incursions in the 1890s marked the start of a new era. The initial military encampments by the Germans gave way to land annexation for plantations, as well as for forest reservation. Early British game rules were softened by fears that enforcement might provoke. Agriculture officials found that a 'hardening of African opinion' undermined the conservation effort.

A London-based lobby, the Society for Preservation of Fauna in the Empire (SPFE) became a focal point for those lobbying for tougher enforcement. Though formed around 1900, its influence in the empire increased in later decades. Its clarion call for natural resource use conservation anticipated the writings of postWorld War II international conservation organisations. The United States and South Africa were upheld as models for East Africa's parks: neither allowed human settlers in their confines. The ground realities of Eastern Africa were more prosaic. Licenses for hunting were rarely given to villagers: one analysis shows only one in twenty given to black Africans between 1922 and 1939 (Parker and Amin 1983: 128). It took three years to finalise the borders of what became the world famous Serengeti Park. Even this agreement between the Parks Board and the Maasai pastoralists was explicitly on the basis that the latter's rights would be unaffected. It is a different matter that these assurances were later violated. As in South Africa, there
were often double standards.

The Ngorongoro Crater, a focus of contests between officials and herders, had earlier been opened up for a German rancher who kept cattle and shot wildebeeste. Eventually, the Maasai found their access curtailed: rights became conditional, were reduced to privileges and access was only retained after protracted conflicts. The Serengeti and Ngorongoro were only a few hours drive from the Kenyan border and with the outbreak of the Mau Mau rebellion in 1951, officials treaded warily. There were some brakes on the pace of exclusion. A Maasai memorandum from the Serengeti plains quoted by Neumann put it very simply, ‘From time to time, we see white hunters posing with the trophies of the animals they have shot . . . . It is the very same people and their friends who wish to evict us from the National Park, yet we think it is they who are the enemies of the game rather than us’. [3]

A thinly disguised distrust of African abilities to rule themselves meshed well with concerns that they would devastate their wild birds, animals and landscapes. Such concerns were common as de-colonisation loomed but only rarely were they expressed as candidly as with reference to Africa. Bernhard Grzimek, the legendary German zoologist who co-authored *Serengeti Shall Not Die*, and which was later translated into eighteen languages, was a typical case. Claiming as he did that, ‘A Negro is an equal and a brother’, he still warned against the ‘overhasty conversion of coloured colonies into independent democratic states’. The green agendas of colonisers were contrasted with the more immediate, day-to-day preoccupations of their subjects. Conservation was a pretext for the continuance of colonialism (Grzimek and Grzimek 1964: 178-79).

Grzimek’s fears were misplaced. Two years after his book was published, his platform was taken over by erstwhile nationalist agitators who now replaced the British. The ‘idea of wilderness’ had found fresh adherents. In his Arusha Manifesto, President Julius Nyerere (1961-85) struck a note that warmed the hearts of Western wildlife lobbies. Tanzania’s natural treasures were held ‘in trusteeship’ for the whole world. Recent scholarship has shown that members of the very conservation groups who lauded its contents prepared the actual draft! That still hardly makes it clear who was using whom. Nyerere wanted developed countries to pay for the protection. He had other reasons too. As he had famously remarked, he did not ‘want to spend his holidays watching crocodiles. Nevertheless I am fully in favour of their survival’. Many foreign visitors made tourism the largest source of revenue for Tanzania after diamonds and sisal (Bonner 1993: 68-69; Nash 1982). But this did not resolve the conflicts on the ground: it often only deepened them. The issue of what Africa really ought to look like is a contentious one.

There were differences not only between but also within nations. Lines of continuity with the colonial era could sometimes be striking. In the Serengeti case, the notion of a natural space devoid of the presence of pastoralists meshed well with independent Tanzania’s dominant ideology of self-reliant socialism. The Selous Game Reserve, a 44,000 sq. km. tract was the scene of the Maji Maji rebellion against the Germans in the early 1900s. Two decades later, it saw forcible evictions by the British during the tsetse fly control drive. The rulers of the new nation state took up further resettlement. Nyerere eventually had eight of ten villages in the country regrouped under the Villagisation Scheme as this was seen as the key to socio-economic development. The eviction of the Maasai from Serengeti was not an exception: such relocations and displacements became a major feature of conservation policy until very recently. In most parks, displacement was seen as a prerequisite for successful preservation (Shao 1986).

The great insight of Neumann’s work is his grasp of what these changes meant and still mean for local peoples. The issue as he suggests goes beyond immediate grievances such as denial of access to ancestral lands, curbs on resource use and conflicts with wildlife on cultivated lands. The steady erosion of rights continued through the 1960s and the 1970s. But it has recently given way to greater emphasis on community involvement in conservation. Several sites of conflict in the past are now scenes of an array of approaches that include sharing revenues from tourism, cooperative protection and expenditure on welfare. Serengeti, Arusha and Selous; all familiar as scenes of conservation mired in conflict are now sites for new approaches (Rodgers et al. 2003). Yet, the past is never far away. Difficult issues refuse to go away. Even benefit-sharing is no panacea. For instance, the construction of classrooms may not directly be linked to the reduction of grazing trespass. Conversely, only very rarely has the restitution of customary claims been a matter for re-negotiation. Still, redress has not come merely due to changes in conservation ideology and shifting donor preferences. It is also the result of a growing assertion of rights on the ground that rarely takes the form of open rebellion but endures in myriad other forms. Costs of exclusion for local people still outweigh benefits like a share of park revenues: this is the picture that emerges in Arusha.

In Kilimanjaro’s Shadow

The great advantage of the historical insights of studies like those of Kruger and Arusha is the way they illumine the processes by which specific decisions and conflicts in the past shaped the present. But the evolution of alternatives on the ground is far more difficult. For Carruthers, the historian, and Neumann, the geographer, the past is a guide to what the present should not be about. Crafting alternatives on the ground is perhaps equally, if not more challenging. A sense of disquiet with conservation via coercion is a starting point. It still opens up dilemmas on how to ensure participation without damaging core conservation goals such as protecting ecological integrity and maintaining species diversity.

One person who was central to the search for other, more inclusive models of conservation was David Western. The son of a former British Indian Army Officer, who became a professional hunter in Kenya, his own life bridged many transitions. There was the shift to the Kenya of uhuru (freedom) in a polity dominated by the Kikuyu tribe. Equally, there was a shift from the world of old white hunter naturalists and wardens to a new Africa, where independence went together with a growing role for professional scientists. Western’s own life is fascinating enough: he has played a key role at critical junctures in conservation debates. These include the great debates of the 1980s on whether and why elephant numbers were declining, culminating in the CITES ban on ivory in 1989. But much of his life, his career and the story told here centres on his work in Kenya’s Amboseli.

Like neighbouring Tanzania, Kenya was a former British colony: Jomo Kenyatta ruled as President till 1977, and was succeeded by Daniel Arap Moi. The stable one-party state was more open to the West through the Cold War years than Tanzania. More importantly, it was an early leader in developing sport hunting and wildlife-based tourism. By the late 1960s, when Western was a young researcher, Amboseli already attracted 60,000 tourists a year. By this time, the first generation of African park and wildlife administrators was also making their presence felt. Kenya was also different in other ways. The Nairobi University and the Institute of Development Studies became a hot bed of academic activity by African-born researchers.
Neither the Maasai nor the wildlife are frozen in time. But the changes do not fit any pre-conceived neo-Malthusian pattern. There is one central narrative from the late 1960s onwards: a deep realisation of the complex links between nature and people. About 25,000 wild ungulates could not subsist on Amboseli's 400 sq. km. area alone. The herds required access to forage and water in an expanse of land ten times the size of the Park. Correspondingly, the Maasai needed the water supplies within Amboseli in times of drought and in the annual dry season (Western 1982). Much of greater Amboseli is not cultivable and pastoralists rely on a hardy local breed of cattle. Denudation of the reserve due to overgrazing was a wellworn trope in conservation literature. Western and his colleagues challenged it, presenting evidence to the contrary. They traced the phenomena of denudation to more complex patterns of ecological change, including increasing water salinity, and the longer time cycles of ecological transitions. In fact, there was no ‘steady state equilibrium’. Fire, elephants and cattle opened up the thorn scrub. Cattle grazing on the savannah opened up spaces for regeneration of thickets of trees. But there were often variations; elephants created grasslands by knocking down trees. The latter grew back over time: a cycle longer than one person’s lifetime but clear enough if one consulted older records. Places like the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem attracted international attention as huge herds of zebra and wildebeeste gathered in open savannah. But the grasslands were part of a continuum, with thickets and mature tree forest. Taking one place at a time out of context tended to give a misleading impression of timeless harmony in nature.

The Maasai were also agents of change. Human and cattle numbers grew, and aspirations changed. Western maps the contrasts between Ololtpito, the senior Maasai leader in national politics and a new generation of educated leaders. The older ways of life, never static, were now changing at a faster pace. In the 1973 drought, even those Maasai who liked the pastoral way of life tried a hand at owning land, which was let out for cultivation. Here lay the seeds of a second critical danger. Private farms could wreck havoc in an insidious way. The privatisation of land into plots and the spread of fences could cut off migratory routes for wild animals. These would undermine the ecological integrity of the whole region. The segregation of park and herder would damage the interests of both. Western’s is only one view of a complex, multi-faceted process. What is significant is that a scientist should take aboard social concerns at the heart of his own work. This marks a major change from an exclusive focus on biotic systems to the exclusion of human impacts. It is also significant that he distinguishes different groups and classes of human resource users.

There were several distinct phases in the evolution of a cooperative model with many difficult moments. [4] In the first phase, the idea of a role for the Maasai in Amboseli did not gather enough support among key decision-makers. President Kenyatta himself decreed the creation of a National Park in 1974; only its size was to be reduced to defuse disaffection. It had been a Game Reserve for over a quarter century; the local Maasai now opposed the creation of a park. Alternative ideas slowly gathered support. In 1973, an attempt was made to quantify the opportunity costs of creating a National Park in Amboseli. The estimate was beguiling. It was possible to earn far more by combining stock keeping with wildlife. There would have to be give and take on both sides, but the key lay in coexistence not separation. In the mid-1970s, a World Bank-funded scheme was launched; Maasai leaders even met with the President of Kenya. The project effected a series of careful compromises: resources and responsibilities were to be shared. The Maasai agreed to leave the park zone. In return they were promised a share of tourism revenues, adequate water supplies for cattle and fees for commercial hunts on their own lands. The project worked well for about five years and then came unstuck. The government halted payments, cut off the water supply and reneged on agreements. Changes of personnel and a merger of the Game and Parks Departments did not improve matters. Parashino, a Maasai, did not appear incorrect in his cynicism: ‘A park means the Maasai lose’ (Western 2002: 105).

Western was not always directly engaged with Amboseli, being simultaneously drawn to research. He was also a key player in major conservation policy debates, particularly in connection with the African elephant. But even these, such as the factors behind the sharp decline in elephant numbers, would bring him back to Amboseli. In a sense the place never left his life. It drew him back not merely as a scientist but as an active negotiator for change. The chance to influence policy came amidst a major crisis and propelled him to centre-stage. Fresh waves of poaching decimated the rhino and elephant across much of sub-Saharan Africa. Kenya alone lost as many as 140,000 elephants in a matter of two decades: many heads started to roll. By the late 1980s, African nation states were ready for draconian measures to save their wildlife from poaching rings (Western 2002), [5]

The creation of the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and the appointment of Richard Leakey heralded major changes. Western was Leakey’s successor as head of the KWS and is cautious in criticisms of the latter’s tenure (1987-94 and 1998- 2000). There were, however, major differences in emphasis. Leakey trusted more in the old ‘fortress-like’ methods; Western leaned as always in favour of reform. Amboseli was the litmus test. Leakey promised a change in attitudes towards people, but tough policing stayed his core approach. Leakey’s ouster was a result of his attempt to wrest control of the famous Maasai Mara Reserve from the powerful Narok District Council. Western’s own policies sought to reverse the trend. Only 5 per cent of all visitors to parks were Kenyan. Fees for them were halved in ‘Parks for Kenyans’ drive. A review team brought scientists, politicians and community representatives together. Landowners’ associations were encouraged to take up wildlife conservation. Public hearings were held to enable people to air their grievances. Kenya resisted donor (especially World Bank) pressure to cut back on fifty of the fifty-six reserves and parks.

Despite changes in personnel, his core philosophy has won more adherents. There has been progress on more participatory conservation, if in a piecemeal manner. Many early initiatives have now borne fruit. Between 1997 and 2002 alone over 2,500 sq. km. of land has been set aside for wildlife protection by communities and landowners in Kenya. The preservationist model continues in the national parks but it is no more the only approach to protection. The book ends on a positive note with the account of a meeting of the
Year of the Gorilla

Kenya and Tanzania are more politically stable than adjacent Rwanda, a country recently at the centre of international attention due to civil war and genocide. In conservation terms, it has long been a focus of attention due to the occurrence of a rare and charismatic primate: the mountain gorilla. Few large vertebrates can match its popular appeal. The gorilla, the largest of primates is found in eleven countries, but the mountain gorilla is a rarer sub-species. Only 600 survive. Save for a handful in Uganda, Gorilla gorilla berengei inhabits former Belgian possessions in East and Central Africa (Butynski 2001: 13). The Congo and to a greater extent Rwanda have a long but troubled history of gorilla conservation. In the Kingdom of Gorillas chronicles an innovative attempt to ensure the species has a secure future. But the region’s history has been very different from that of East or Southern Africa. As in Western’s case, here too is an instance of scientists grappling with field-level choices of how best to promote conservation with a human dimension. This has been compounded in no small way by the existence for a while of much harsher, even racially informed approaches in the same site.

The sub-species has remained fascinating to scientists ever since it was first described for modern science by Captain Oscar von Beringen in 1902. At the time, Rwanda and Burundi were German colonies. The adjacent Congo, also gorilla territory, became the ‘personal property’ of the ruler of Belgium in 1885, though this gave way to direct Belgian rule. Prince Albert’s visit to Yellowstone National Park in USA won him over to the idea of a refuge for the gorilla. Simultaneously, Carl Akeley’s lobbying marked the start of an active role for American biologists in the region. By the time of his death in 1926, Akeley had travelled widely across Africa for three decades: to Somaliland, East Africa and into the Virungas volcanoes on expeditions, filming, hunting and collecting specimens for the American Museum of Natural History. A year before this the Parc d’Albert came into being: the continent’s first park outside of South Africa.

Five years later, Akeley’s spouse and associate Mary Jobe Akeley described it as the first ever park to be established for ‘purely scientific purposes’. But the genesis of conflict was already evident. To avoid conflicts between ‘native rights’ and nature, there would be curbs on cultivation and hunting. A new research centre would include ‘buildings designed for use of white men unaccustomed to the tropics’. Gorillas would be secure as long as the rulers and their co-equals could study them: those who lived in the Virungas had a secondary role (Akeley 1931). [6] Not that all apes were safe. Akeley shot a gorilla family for a New York Museum. Domination had begun but conservation proved a harder act to follow. The scientific centre never took off; the Belgians began to lose their hold by the end of World War II (Haraway 1995). Imperial powers became engaged with species conservation precisely when their grip on colonies grew looser.

There were many changes and new challenges in the post 1945 era. George Schaller made a significant observation: newly independent Rwanda’s Park was far better protected than the one in Belgian Congo. The latter had been ‘abandoned long before independence to graziers, poachers and woodcutters’. Warden Amicet Mburanumwe, stringently protected the Rwandan Park. In November 1960, he spoke of the keys to success: conservation, scientific cooperation and the expansion of tourism (Schaller 1964: 161, 241-43). But Rwanda’s wildlife would not continue to be so fortunate. Much depended on the agendas of the rulers. A pioneer of primate behaviour noted that in Tanzania cultivators adjacent to reserves hoped to reclaim land for growing crops. The authorities resisted such demands both during and after British rule (Goodall 1974: 30). [7] However, the Belgians in Rwanda did not create a clear administrative system for conservation. In 1958, they opened up a fifth of the reserve to grow pyrethrum, a source for biopesticides in Europe. After independence, the Ministry of Agriculture oversaw the Park till as late as the mid-1970s. Axe and plough got to work on the forest. In 1969, 40 per cent of the Park was opened up for cultivation in a project funded by the European Common Market.

This was the backdrop against which Dian Fossey entered the region. First attempting research in the Kivu region of Congo, she soon shifted to Rwanda. She became a defender of the species against poachers and encroachers. Entering a scene where the park administration was in a run-down state, she soon organised anti-poaching patrols, conducted censuses, lobbied international funding agencies and founded a research centre at Karisoke. Fossey’s model of ‘active’ as opposed to ‘theoretical conservation’ enabled her to free a small tract from rival human intrusions. This found her often usurping the role of the park authorities. Such strategies attracted fierce controversy long before her murder in December 1985. Fossey’s books and articles placed the issue of the mountain gorilla before a global audience. Her dedication was undeniable, but the means adopted were self-defeating.

Bill Weber and Amy Vedder, authors of the book under review, arrived in the country to work with Fossey in 1978. They were unable to identify with her philosophy of conservation. The authors’ criticisms of her condescending attitude to local people are not to be dismissed lightly. If anything, they are restrained in their descriptions. Fossey tortured and beat up intruders, used black magic and even killed off cattle found in the Park. Her own account includes several unsavoury episodes. Even admirers had qualms over her scorned earth tactics. On one occasion, an American colleague tried to dissuade her in a poacher camp but failed. Fossey later recalled, how, as I stood there breaking bamboo snares one by one, she stood apart and in a very firm way asked what right I had, an American, here in Africa for only a few months, to invade the rights of Africans whose country it was. I went on breaking traps, though I couldn’t help but agree with her-Africa belongs to Africans (Mowat 1988: 68, 104, 123-24; Goodall 1979: 60).

The deep rifts with park authorities worsened such attitudes. Fossey’s style deeply offended the sovereignty of a newly free country, and won few allies for the cause she represented. Only white researchers were recruited: apes, it was said had, ‘only known Africans as poachers in the past’. Not a single Rwandan researcher was trained or inducted in the entire Fossey period, in contrast to Jane Goodall in the Gombe, Tanzania where Tanzanian nationals took over virtually all research from around 1975 (Fossey 1987: 57; Haraway 1992: 167-70). Even the Rwandan Director of the Park felt that the Virungas were set aside for ‘white people only’. Fossey went so far as to assert that, ‘Africans are not allowed to approach my gorillas on account of their skin colour’ (Mowat 1988: 235-36).

The Karisoke Centre bypassed park officials. In a fascinating anecdote, the Director of the Park once accosted Weber and Vedder and asked whether two Rwandans could walk into Yellowstone and commence research without any permission from the local...
The defence of gorillas against poachers' forays was not enough to save them if officials and local inhabitants were treated with disdain. Weber and Vedder tried a different approach, lobbying the authorities and assessing local opinions through surveys. The Park lacked clear local support. The continued survival of the great apes was favoured by 80 per cent of Rwandan farmers. But one out of two hoped the Park would be converted to arable land; 40 per cent collected firewood from the Park. Over 100,000 people lived within a 5-mile radius of its borders. The mere scientific value of the species and its global popularity meant little to farmers or herders. Nor was it enough for park officials to convince the political leadership of the country. Yet, there was some ground for hope.

The recently founded park authority, ORTPN, shared the positive assessment of gorilla-centred tourism. Unlike in British East Africa, the conservation body was given an institutional basis more than a decade after independence. The park authorities became allies against agrarian extension. The mountain gorilla emerged as a symbol of Rwandan nationalism. The species would win a lease of life due to its unique importance to a small developing country. Even 'crazy white people' would pay $1,000 for a four-member party to trek into a forest within touching distance of the apes became allies for a cause. They gave the decision-makers of a poor country strapped for foreign exchange a convincing reason to keep the Park intact. When a Belgian-funded cattle-raising project threatened to further reduce the habitat, tourism was seen as a better bet. Three thousand tourists paying $25 each would generate more than any cattle-raising scheme could.

The promise of foreign exchange helped forestall denudation. The scheme also combined job generation with ecotourism. The pied wagtail, a traditional Rwandan symbol of goodwill was the emblem of an education programme in schools. A younger generation of Rwandans saw wildlife films on their country for the very first time and debated whether and how to conserve their natural heritage. The Mountain Gorilla Project began in 1979 in response to a crisis; it soon became a viable alternative to an approach that solely relied on exclusion and policing on a vigilante basis. By now gorillas totalled 260 with only 30 silverback males. Recovery was quicker than anybody expected. By 1989, losses of animals to poachers dropped from ten a year to only three in ten years. Enforcement improved once local people became allies.

The first joint census by Uganda, Rwanda and the Congo showed an overall increase of nearly 25 per cent in the gorilla population. Income from park fees reached a million dollars the same year. Tourists in the country spent five times as much. The Nyungwe Reserve in southern Rwanda with its colobus monkeys and wealth of bird life became a second tourist destination. In landscape terms, both reserves offered a very different option from the savannah of the Akagera Park which was more akin to East African parks. Primate-based tourism gave Rwandan decision-makers the kind of rationale for conservation previously known to its larger East African neighbours.

There were still many limitations, including a lack of revenue sharing with local communities and less progress on wider environmentally sound schemes to arrest soil erosion and improve firewood supplies. The profits from tourism and wildlife films too rarely went into the pockets of Rwandans on the rim of the gorilla habitat. But the breakthroughs were still significant in a situation that had seemed almost devoid of hope.

Much of the success hinged on political factors that later came undone in the genocide and civil war of the mid-1990s. Rwanda's people were divided into the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi, with the former being the dominant group in national politics. From 1973 till 1994, the Army General Juvenal Habyarimana held power. His patronage was critical for Dian Fossey as much as for Bill Weber and Amy Vedder. The latter scheme ensured a flow of revenues to his power centres in the north while the Nyungwe project added to patronage. By the late 1970s, population growth was of the rate of 3.7 per cent and the density of people per sq. km, was as high as 500 in some tracts. [8] But the breakdown was a political rather than a demographic one. Political turmoil in neighbouring Uganda led to a more assertive mood among the Tutsi. Some formed an armed insurgent group to try seizing power in Rwanda, while a section of Hutus too grouped into an extremist force. Clashes till 1993 and an abortive accord could not forestall the genocide of 1994 in which more than a million people were killed and hundreds of thousands rendered homeless.

Yet, Rwanda witnessed a form of 'conservation nationalism' of a sort the world has rarely seen in the past. It is tempting to compare the saga of the mountain gorilla to another rare species that barely made it through wars in its only home in the wild, the European bison. Also a creature on shifting borderlands (between Poland, Germany and Russia), a huge number were slaughtered in World War I (1914-18) by German troops. The population was augmented with captive-born specimens in the post-war period (Schama 1995: 37-74). In the closing years of the twentieth century, Rwanda presents a contrasting case of a very different approach to a rare species. Its experience shows how ideas of protection can find unlikely but valuable adherents. In the initial years of the Rwandan Civil War only one gorilla was killed with all insurgent groups agreeing they were too valuable to be killed by anyone. This did not prevent another sixteen losing their lives between 1995 and 1998. Still, things could have been far worse. Even the Hutu rebel armies freed the park guards in the Virungas and asked them to get back to work. The gorilla as a national icon had a power that transcended its appeal as a symbol of conservation. Only once the two images merged, could its survival be assured.

The wider tragedy affected many Rwandans who had worked hard to save the endangered species from extinction. Those who did not fall in line with armed groups often paid with their lives. These included ranger Jonas Guitonda who refused to share profits with cattle traffickers in the Park, and two former Karisoke workers Nshogoza and Kanyarogano. The travails are far from over but the foundations laid in the country in the late 1970s have held firm. Many former staff freed from gaol drifted back to rejoin work. Eugene Ratagumara, jailed by insurgents, was released and assumed duties again in the Nyungwe Park.

By 2001, a fresh census found another increase in gorilla numbers in the Virungas. A new generation of wild gorillas now with African not Anglophone nicknames wins acquaintance with 2,000 tourists a year, only a third of the peak level of the pre-war years but a renewal nevertheless (Anonymous 2002; also see Schaller 1995). But the atmosphere of cooperative conservation among the three gorilla range states had given way to deep animosity and suspicion fuelled by conflicting interests in the continuing civil war in the Congo. Doubts over the consequences of ape-centred tourism have never quite died away, especially due to the threat of contraction of diseases from human visitors. As many as seventy tourists with guides visit the gorillas on an average day at peak season: the dangers are ever present (Butynski 2001: 29-36).

There is still a wider insight into the processes by which the efforts of the Mountain Gorilla Project won fresh ground even if problems remain. Rwandans in responsible positions were central in saving the species. Its forest home won a lease of life only when they saw
tangible benefits from conservation. Even genocide, civil war, inter-state strife in the region and great power manoeuvres, failed to
over ride such enlightened self-interest. It was active, on-site conservation that succeeded not pure research and internationally
funded policing alone. The Virungas were unlike Kibale in neighbouring Uganda where there were sharp conflicts with human settlers
amongst themselves within the Park. There were few people-park conflicts on the perimeter of the gorilla reserve. No settlers lived within
(Struhsaker 2002). The Virungas refuge did not suffer the fate of Akagera, the Rwandan Park on the Tanzanian border, which was
cleared and cultivated by refugees. Though the Park itself covers only 0.5 per cent of Rwanda, the international appeal of the gorilla
made it a prize worth guarding for all sides in the conflict.

Amidst the tragedies, hope springs anew. This perhaps is the message of the history of Africa's parks. Innovative conservation
approaches in Amboseli and Parc des Volcans are part of a growing tableau of new initiatives in the continent. In a variety of ways, it
is better placed than South Africa, a region with which this writer is much more familiar. It is commonplace to assert that the absence of
innovation and the more pronounced reliance on exclusion and hard line preservation in South Asia is due to the higher level of
human pressures and the smaller expanse of protected areas. There is a grain of truth in such observations. A quick comparison
between India and Tanzania shows that the latter has a population density of 33 to a sq. km. While India's is over 300. Similarly, the
average size of a Tanzanian park or reserve is over 2,000 sq. km., more than eight times that of the average acreage of an Indian
sanctuary or park. The Selous Game Reserve would easily dwarf all the tiger reserves in India combined. At a macro level, India is
twice the size of South Africa but has over a billion people to the former's 43 million (Rangarajan 2001: 103; Rodgers et al.

But there is more to the picture as is evident in the insights provided by the works on four African countries, each with its distinctive
history and political profile. Innovation in part also stems from the institutional logic of the parks' system: in Kenya, the Wildlife Service
and before that, the National Parks Department was able and willing to negotiate sharing of power. The Virungas case was different,
given that the ORTPN was only four years into its existence when the Mountain Gorilla Project was launched.

South Africa saw the creation of a Forest Department before the rest of the British Empire, as early as 1864. The first park was created
in the United Provinces nearly a decade after Kruger and the Parc des Volcans. In India, protection of the prince's or the king's game
had a longer lineage and firmer history than the more half-hearted attempts of the British. These included the Gir Forest in western
India, with the last population of lions in Asia, subject to very few royal hunts from 1900 (Rangarajan 2002). British India was very
different from the princely states and it accounted for two-thirds of South Asia. Though the Game Rules dated back over half-a-
century, production, rather than protection was the watchword till well after independence. The clarion calls for action by popular
writers in Africa and South Asia grew after World War II, but the institutional form of the responses was very different. To this day,
the Wildlife Wing of the Indian Forest Department administers the parks and sanctuaries. There is no autonomous Parks Board (as in
South Africa) or a Department (like in Rwanda), or an equivalent of the Kenyan Wildlife Service. Much of this can be traced back to
the institutional legacy of the empire; the foresters who control a fifth of India's land mass are reluctant to part with any of it to a
separate wildlife conservation authority.

It is perhaps no coincidence that revenue sharing with people on the park perimeter has actually taken off in one region of South Asia,
ever under direct British rule, Nepal. But the experiment in the Royal Chitwan National Park has yet to be replicated in any of the
other nation states in the region. Yet, the tract was more comparable to the princely reserves in India (Dinerstein et al. 1999). The idea
of safeguarding the entire flora and fauna as opposed to populations of key vertebrates became official policy as late as 1970 only. At
Alaska in preservation, South Asia has also lagged in tagging the initiative in assigning communities a role in
conservation. There have been major policy changes with regard to managing forests, e.g., the widespread introduction of Joint
Forest Management. These do not, however, have any clear counterpart in national parks, or wildlife sanctuaries. Community-run
reserves are a relatively new concept in the policy-makers' lexicon. They have no legal standing or recognition in policy (Kothari et al.
1999). Conversely, the acreage of Forest Department land in India, 23 per cent of the land area, is comparable to the area under
parks and wildlife reserves in Tanzania. Even after a ten-fold accretion in area from 1969-89, the total percentage of the land mass
under India's parks and sanctuaries is only 5 per cent, far less than even Kenya's 8 per cent (Bonner 1993: 195; Rodgers et al. 2000).

Other contrasts between and within the two regions are worth reflecting upon. Arusha or the Virungas Parks are certainly comparable
to reserves in Nepal, Bangladesh or India in acreage and the intensity of human pressures on the rim. But the great apes of Central
Africa, the huge migratory herds of the Serengeti plains or even the South African veld have no counterpart in Asia. The spectacle of
the last Eden, ahistorical as it may be, has an appeal for tourists from North America, Europe and Japan that would be hard to match
(Turnbull 1981).

Similarly, the nature of land ownership in South Africa and the arrangements for licensed hunts on community lands as in Kenya or
Zimbabwe too do not have counterparts in Asia. Interestingly, the latter was actually mooted in Pakistan by the one biologist, George
Schaller, who worked in both Africa and South Asia for two decades. But nothing came of his proposal to 'crop' herds of wild goats
and sheep in parts of Pakistan's highlands. Again, the region he was dealing with was exceptional. Unlike much of British East Africa,
uncultivable due to the absence of adequate rainfall or the presence of the tsetse fly, over half of South Asia is cultivable. The forest
has been pushed back in much of the river basins and lowlands by the plough and axe. This still leaves several regions with extensive
forest cover, but their total acreage is much smaller than in most African countries (Schaller 1976).

The level of human development and the economic profile of a country or the region in which a park is located are critical in the kind of
human pressures it has to handle. Southern Africa in general has higher human development levels than any neo-Malthusian
scenario would allow for. Western is prescient in pointing to the decline in Kenya's population growth rate. Once at 3.5 per cent it is now
two-thirds that of South Africa and the rest of the continent, though life expectancy was less than 40 years. The level of health and
education spending are reflected in the levels of human development but these cannot mask internal inequities. A majority of
South Africa's 43 million citizens live in cities and towns compared to only 40 per cent in developing nations as a whole. The ability of
the apartheid regime to survive economic isolation and boycotts was partly on account of the level of industrial development. The fact

Africa and South Asia: Contrasting Legacies in Conservation

The level of human development and the economic profile of a country or the region in which a park is located are critical in the kind of
human pressures it has to handle. Southern Africa in general has higher human development levels than any neo-Malthusian
scenario would allow for. Western is prescient in pointing to the decline in Kenya's population growth rate. Once at 3.5 per cent it is now
two-thirds that of South Africa and the rest of the continent, though life expectancy was less than 40 years. The level of health and
education spending are reflected in the levels of human development but these cannot mask internal inequities. A majority of
South Africa's 43 million citizens live in cities and towns compared to only 40 per cent in developing nations as a whole. The ability of
the apartheid regime to survive economic isolation and boycotts was partly on account of the level of industrial development. The fact
that fewer people subsist on the land also makes leeway for more accommodation in the rural hinterland (United Nations Development Programme 2002).

Other striking contrasts demonstrate the enormity of the challenge that conservation faces in Africa. It is well known that South Africa's level of internal inequality has few other parallels. One estimate is that 10 per cent of the population corners 46 per cent of the national income. Equally serious, the denial of access to modern higher education has left the sciences in general and ecology and conservation-related disciplines in particular dominated by whites. In Central Africa, Belgian colonialism was rapacious and hardly allowed for upward mobility, the army being a partial exception. South Africa developed wildlife biology in the 1950s, with Pretoria University emerging as a centre of excellence, but the doors were closed to most non-whites (Carruthers 1995: 115). The Serengeti had a world class centre in Seronera by the late 1960s, but the only black Africans were 'bottle washers or mechanics'. From 1967 to 1975, sixty graduates and other researchers worked in Gombe: all were foreign and none were of the Tanzanian majority community. It was only in the mid-1970s that the picture began to change in Tanzania: as Haraway puts it, Third World nationals were beginning to shed the cloak of anonymity (Haraway 1992: 167-70). Only a decade earlier, a major conclave on the future of East Africa's wildlife found fifty-one of the fifty-five participants of the former ruling race (Western 2002: 54, 90). There is no doubt there have been major changes since then. The process of engagement is chronicled by authors like David Western, himself a Kenyan born white. Similarly, it was only the Rwandan park officials and authorities that saved the gorillas of the Virungas through and after the war. But, the gap remains an all too real one. Political power may have passed from colonisers to independent nation states in East and Central Africa, apartheid may be a part of history, but the absence of more black voices in debates as experts in the sciences is cause for concern.

Here, the picture in South Asia is a markedly different one, though it has to do with a very different history of British imperialism in the region. By the early nineteenth century, eastern India already had a bi-lingual intelligentsia, before even Japan did. More central to our theme, the emerging middle classes threw up early scientific figures often funded by the princes. Of these Salim Ali who died in 1987 was only the best known. Ali had already been exposed to cutting edge ecological theory in Germany in 1929-30, drew support from the Bombay Natural History Society that had included Indian literati from the time of its birth and went on to collaborate with the American scientist Dillon Ripley from the 1940s onwards (Ali 1985: 96, 180-81). In 1947-57 itself, the Indian government was imposing restrictions on Western primate experts and encouraging collaborations in publishing. The emergence of a small nucleus of Indian scientists, however, soon ceased to directly reflect in debates on conservation policy. Partly due to the breakdown of relations with the US in the early 1970s, and also the intransigence of the Forest Department, wildlife biology as a discipline flowered much later in India than in East Africa. George Schaller's work The Deer and the Tiger did make a mark, but it took over a decade for it to bear fruit. Nepal was ahead of India in this respect due to the spin-offs from the Smithsonian Institution's research work in the Royal Chitwan National Park (Lewis 2000, 2003: 233-38; Schaller 1968). So, the picture is a mixed one. While the social base of science was broader in South Asia there was greater openness to wildlife biology in much of Africa.

But it is in this respect that the works reviewed here point the way ahead. The Kruger story is a salutary one. All too often, there is tendency to see parks as an American import (or export) into other societies, ignoring the ways in which the content could differ from the form. Local political cultures and ground realities make national histories of conservation all too vital, and Carruthers sets a standard that will be hard to equal. Imposing Wilderness and Western's work sit well together. The former provides searing, intellectual critique; the latter connotes the life of a conservationist in the field. The message in a work like In Kingdom of Gorillas is crystal clear. For too long, popular conservation literature has centred on the lives of researchers and their subjects: Goodall and the chimpanzees, Fossey and the gorilla being prime examples. But the picture of Africa was one without its people, their cultures and dilemmas. It was as if the scientist worked in a void with only animals for company. The new genre takes the spotlight to the life stories of women and men of science who grapple with conservation. These are accounts sensitive to ecological constraints but also to the human dimension. The Kenyan case is a fascinating one that stretches back across the decades; the one from Rwanda is truly a tale of hope. Such initiatives show how conservation can begin to move away from a troubled past to a more just future.[57]

References


African Parks is a non-profit conservation organization that takes on direct responsibility for the rehabilitation and long-term management of protected areas in partnership with governments and local communities. Saving Wildlife. We are facing a conservation crisis in Africa. Some of the planet's most spectacular species are being lost, but we are working to protect them. African History and Politics Seminar: Sisyphus in Central Africa: Managing the Crisis in the Central African Republic. 4 May 2015, 5:00 pm. Speaker(s): Roland Marchal (CERI-Sciences Po). Sir Stephen Sedley sheds new light on the death of Dag Hammarskjold: Contested Decolonisation and the Dilemmas of Intervention. The United Nations and Nation-making along the Congolese-Northern Rhodesian border, 1960-1964. 28 April 2015, 2:00 pm. The dilemma being up to 6,000 pounds of rhinoceros charging toward us—led by those huge dagger-shaped horns—at 25 to 30 miles an hour or, more significantly, at least three or four times as fast as I can run. Yet in spite of all their brute force, these prehistoric-looking creatures are now endangered. During the past four years, the threat to their survival has dramatically increased. In 2007 only 13 rhinos were illegally poached in South Africa. In 2010 the number was 333. Last year at least 448 rhinos were slaughtered, including 19 of the critically endangered black rhinos. Nat Geo Explorers ' Travel Hacks and Stories. Explorers Enter Heart of Africa With Fat Bikes and Scuba Gear. Sea otters use tools, too. Now scientists look at their 'archaeology'. This website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website you are giving consent to cookies being used. For information on cookies and how you can disable them visit our Policy.