

African conservation is an industry involving thousands of students, researchers, NGOs, funders, private sector operators and parastatals, all with a single purpose: the protection of the continent's wildlife and wild places. It is small when compared with commercial enterprises, but its stakeholders are dedicated and passionate and they've been at it for well over 100 years. Why then are wildlife numbers across the continent declining? Do we simply need more money, people and resources, or are we going about the business of conservation the wrong way? **Ian Michler** decides that it's time to confront the elephant in the room.

TEXT BY IAN MICHLER

# THE CONSERVATION QUANDARY



ISTOCK/ONUR DÖNGEL

Last year Cambridge University zoologist Dr Ian Craigie and his colleagues released a report called 'Large mammal population declines in Africa's protected areas'. The paper, published in *Biological Conservation*, analysed 78 protected areas from southern, East and West Africa and concluded that Africa's large mammal populations had declined by 59 per cent over the past 40 years. Large primates are the big losers, as are lions, African wild dogs and cheetahs. That's hardly news – a growing number of studies have highlighted these trends – but these figures also apply to many ungulate species we may regard as common. Wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, hartebeest, eland and giraffe ... they are all there too. Moreover, as the survey excluded national parks and reserves in remote locations, as well as wilderness areas falling outside formal protection, the wider situation is likely to be far worse.

These declines have occurred despite the endeavours of an entire industry, comprising private sector, government and NGO groupings dedicated to conservation, environmental sustainability and social justice, working to avoid this precise scenario. The first protected areas on the continent were declared as far back as the late 1800s, yet despite more than 100 years of (admittedly sporadic) awareness of Africa's wilderness areas, habitat and wildlife have been lost across most regions.

It is time we took a critical look at our conservation models. Are we missing something, or are they fatally flawed?

## THE SCARS OF THE PAST

Protected areas, which encompass any category of land given some form of official protection, have been and remain the foundation of Africa's conservation initiatives. However, the way in which many of them came into existence is proving central to the challenges and problems facing conservationists today.

At the turn of the last century, when the boundaries of parks like Kruger and Amboseli were established, ecology – the study of how living organisms relate to each other and their environment – was in its infancy. Administrators split wet and dry season ranges, and gave little thought to weather patterns and their impact on migratory movements. The fences, roads and agriculture that sprang from these decisions have had disastrous consequences

for adult mortality and the calving success of many ungulate species.

Equally disastrous have been the independence struggles and protracted civil wars that have characterised much of the continent's history. Many wilderness areas served as bases (and pantries) for armed forces, often for decades at a time, with the true extent of wildlife losses going largely undocumented.

There have been human costs as well. The rural communities living in and around most protected areas were not consulted when they were established, and researchers suggest as many as 15 million people were directly affected by forced removals. The injustice was aggravated when traditional lifestyles were either curtailed or prohibited, and the people were generally excluded from any financial benefits accruing to the new landowners. Alienated and marginalised, communities have been left to eke out a living on the outskirts of the continent's iconic parks and reserves.

It is no wonder that hostility and apathy towards present-day conservation goals remain. Human pressures such as slash-and-burn agriculture, poaching, wood collection and overgrazing by domestic livestock, compounded by increasing populations, are some of the largest contributors to biodiversity loss.

These, then, are the protected areas that the conservation community is desperately trying to keep intact.

## WHO'S IN CHARGE ANYWAY?

According to IUCN UNEP's World Database on Protected Areas (2011), sub-Saharan Africa has 11.8 per cent of its land under formal national protection, whereas North Africa has only four per cent. (Within these regions, however, there are wide disparities between countries. Botswana conserves 30.93 per cent of its land; South Africa just 6.9 per cent.) The management of these protected areas takes various forms, and where it's a joint operation between government and private operators, NGOs often provide the link. Given the severity of the declines, it is pertinent to ask: are *all* custodians failing in their mandates, or are some more effective than others?

Governments, as owners of national parks, bear the ultimate responsibility. Although they can justifiably point to the conflicts they inherited as mitigating factors, their record in the post-colonial era is patchy at best. In many African states, the

environment is ranked as the least essential portfolio and as a result, conservation tends to be treated with indifference and, in some instances, outright neglect.

Where active management is in place, it is often characterised by a pattern of extremes. The iconic protected areas, like the Masai Mara National Reserve, Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area and Kruger National Park are given a high profile and used extensively, whereas those in remote locations receive little support. In countries such as Gabon and Angola, government leaders trumpet impressive visions, but little materialises on the ground.

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These operational concerns are exacerbated by two other factors. Firstly, regulations and law enforcement systems are outdated or inadequate. The appropriate legal infrastructure is often absent, as is the will to follow the prosecutorial route to its conclusion, leaving governments unable to counter the organised crime syndicates that are currently targeting wildlife. Secondly, weak monitoring and enforcement systems provide fertile ground for corruption, a scourge that, whether manifest in outright theft or in more insidious bribery, has become a major inhibition to successful conservation.

Peter Fearnhead, the chief executive officer of the African Parks Network, believes that mitigating factors must be considered. 'Governments have committed huge areas to the conservation of biodiversity, at enormous opportunity cost to the electorate. But they struggle to meet the daily needs and aspirations of their own citizens for a plethora of reasons. So, to expect governments to deliver on their international conservation obligations for the benefit of an amorphous international community is too much to ask. The international community must share in the responsibility for the maintenance of protected areas,' he says.

There are also questions to be asked of the private-sector players. Despite the glossy brochures lauding conservation credentials, many operators are in essence financial ventures, driven by their ►

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OPPOSITE Selinda Camp, Okavango Delta. Politically stable and relatively under-populated, Botswana has placed almost a third of its land under formal protection. Its ecotourism enterprises enjoy a degree of success, but wildlife numbers are still falling.

BELOW Lake Urema, Gorongosa National Park. Mozambique conservation was recently boosted by the Gorongosa Restoration Project, funded by wealthy philanthropist Greg Carr, which aims to restore this iconic reserve.

shareholders' demands for profitability. Rigorous interrogation of their genuine commitment to benefit-sharing and the environment, and of their levels of green-washing, is needed. Notwithstanding these reservations, there is a perception that private operators generally have a better grasp of the immediate circumstances than government-run entities have, and are more proficient and passionate when going about their business.

Colin Bell, one of the founding partners of Wilderness Safaris and The Great Plains Company, two of Africa's most highly regarded ecotourism operators, believes the answer lies in sound partnerships between the private sector and government. 'When the roles between rural communities, governments and the tourism industry are structured fairly, these three entities become wildlife's best guardians. When the relationship between the entities is poorly structured, wildlife's long-term potential looks grave,' he says.

For Bell it is possible for private ecotourism companies to fulfil mandates to both their shareholders and the environment, 'as long as there are checks and balances, clear lines of responsibility and accountability, with severe penalties for transgressions and long-term rewards for good custodianship'.

Botswana is one African country that seems to have got the balance between government and private sector just right. Steering clear of the protracted conflicts that have wracked its neighbours, Botswana has implemented sound economic and political planning since its negotiated independence from Britain in 1966, and has placed more than 30 per cent of its land under some form of protection. It is these factors, together with a population density of just 3.4 people per square kilometre, that are crucial to its success. Similarly Namibia, which also enjoys a stable government and low population densities, has garnered kudos for the policies that underwrite its much-admired conservancy initiatives.

Unfortunately, the circumstances and records of these two countries are the exception rather than the norm, and – here's the kicker – despite doing so much 'right', they too continue to lose wildlife. (See Mike Chase's analysis of Botswana's situation in 'View from the top', *Africa Geographic*, August 2011.)

#### THE PRESENT PARADIGM

Whether by way of government, private concern or NGO, the present conservation paradigm is rooted in utilitarian doctrines, with the overarching aim being to lure ever greater numbers of tourists in the hope that their 'eco-dollars' will solve both the biodiversity and poverty issues. But despite the growing number of arrivals and pockets of success in some countries it is, as Craigie's study shows, a tough mandate.

Says Fearnhead, 'For some reason, people look to ecotourism, which consists mostly of small, high-risk enterprises, as the solution to all conservation and community development aspirations. This is unrealistic, as there is only so much extra burden that they can shoulder.'

Why, then, has ecotourism been so casually lumped with the dual responsibility of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation? Development goals are usually in conflict

with those of conservation, and linking these two uneasy bedfellows may well have created a false expectation. One that is, furthermore, reliant on the whim of people to travel.

In stable political environments where profit margins are good – namely, the protected areas where wildlife and habitats are at their most fecund – there has been success. But where the cost-to-benefit equation falls away, or in the remote and less bountiful protected areas that struggle to lure ever-greater numbers of tourists, it is not working. Yet it is these so-called marginal areas that need conservation most.

Ecotourism's capacity to alleviate poverty while conserving wildlife has also been found wanting in the buffer zones, those vital tracts of land that separate protected areas from urban centres and other well-developed localities. Here wildlife and habitat are most at risk as their protection status remains unclear, and they face stiff competition from other land-use options, such as agriculture, mining, logging and housing estates.

With the surge in economic growth and infrastructural development across many parts of Africa, much of it carried out by the Chinese, these less-protected areas have become the new pantries, feeding both the armies of workers and the criminal wildlife syndicates that follow in their wake. Securing the integrity of these twilight zones may just be conservation's greatest challenge, for without them Africa's wildlife will be confined to fewer isolated and fortified parks and reserves.

Transfrontier conservation and corridor initiatives are attempting to expand protected areas by bringing various levels of support to the landowners and communities that lie between them. Here, NGOs play a significant role. The large field-based conservation organisations such as Conservation International (CI), WWF, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) have been instrumental in identifying the 'hotspots', while groups such as the African Parks Network and the Peace Parks Foundation have facilitated the multi-sector partnerships that such initiatives need.



GREAT PLAINS COMPANY

For Bell, this is where all parties involved should show innovation. 'Stakeholders can claw back the losses by creating new community conservancies abutting onto existing parks on a grand scale. Can you imagine what would happen if we could double the amount of land under formal conservation protection in Africa by partnering rural conservancies with safari businesses and NGOs?' he asks.

Innovative though the land acquisition may be, ecotourism will still be relied upon to generate the revenue. Which brings us neatly back to the economics of people travelling, and whether there are

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enough of them to ensure the model can start delivering on one of its key promises – an equitable spread of the spoils.

Historically, local communities have paid a high price for conservation and many continue to lose livelihoods and even lives to wild animals, yet gain no material benefits from doing so. 'Until the vast majority of rural people living alongside Africa's wildlife reserves are incorporated formally into the tourism or wildlife industry in a meaningful way and start to view wildlife as a material financial asset, I believe that much of Africa's wildlife has little chance of long-term survival,' warns

Bell. 'Many parts of Africa have little or no formal – and effective – entrenching of the communities into the wildlife and safari industry. Money often accrues to a few, well-connected individuals and to foreign bank accounts, leaving the poorest rural people in poverty and wildlife numbers plummeting,' he adds.

Because current systems favour the operator, Bell advocates a widespread restructuring of how land is leased and the way fees are paid. Revenue streams to communities must become larger and more reliable.

In the past decade or so, though, a new player has entered the fray.

#### THE RISE OF THE ECO-PHILANTHROPIST

'Eco-philanthropists', to coin a phrase, are those extremely wealthy individuals who are ploughing large amounts of their personal money into conserving existing protected areas across Africa. Generally, their presence has been welcomed – besides the much-needed funding, they bring organisational and administrative skills, and a sense of urgency. As Bell says, 'Any person, community, NGO or company that can help to increase the amount of land under formal conservation protection and convert marginal wildlife land into prime wildlife habitat should be encouraged and supported.'

Fearnhead agrees. 'Conservation in Africa needs all the assistance it can get and this includes the involvement of individual philanthropists.' He does offer a word of caution though. 'Park management is a tough business. Problems are seldom solved, they are just postponed. This can become tiring and frustrating.' ▶



PAUL KERRISON



SCOTT RAMSAY

Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area. Cross-border conservation and corridor initiatives aim to increase the amount of protected land through innovative agreements between governments, private landowners and communities. Ecotourism, however, remains the primary source of revenue generation.

Rich people giving money to the environment is nothing new. Their donations have been the lifeblood of conservation NGOs and other beneficiaries, including the hunting fraternity, for many years. There are, however, some important distinctions between the traditional largesse of the wealthy and this new breed of patron. Eco-philanthropists seem to be more actively involved in their respective projects, and this stewardship brings less politics and bureaucracy. Without profit as the primary motive, they can tackle projects in regions others may avoid for fear of losing money.

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It is for these reasons that the arrival of Greg Carr, a retired Internet and communications entrepreneur from the US, has generated such widespread enthusiasm in Mozambique's conservation circles. Carr's Gorongosa Restoration Project ([www.gorongosa.net](http://www.gorongosa.net)), a non-profit foundation, recently entered into a 20-year public-private partnership with that country's government, committing US\$40-million to the rejuvenation of what was once an iconic national park.

His motivation seems simple enough: 'I love nature and am inspired by landscapes and the diversity of life,' he says. 'In this century, we need to focus on preserving biodiversity for future generations.' While his model for achieving this isn't substantially different from the norm ('I think all national parks would say that they promote science-based conservation practices, "green" ecotourism and mutually supportive community engagement'), Carr does believe that enduring commitment is crucial to the chances of success. 'The challenge is to actually do the work, and that requires long-term focus. Our 20-year commitment may be one factor that distinguishes us from other foreign interventions,' he suggests.

Though the project is barely in its third year, Carr is pleased with the results to date. 'We had 5 500 tourists last year, up

from zero when we started, and we'll have a larger number this year. Many animal populations are up. And through our lobbying, the government of Mozambique added Mount Gorongosa to the park,' he says.

And when his 20 years are over? 'Our strategy is to train and empower Mozambicans to manage their own national park. We try to have as few foreigners on the team as possible. If the system gets going in the right direction, then it will drive itself. Gorongosa needed some philanthropy to push it in the right direction, but some day it won't need me. The park will take care of itself.'

Carr may well achieve his goals, and others in this elite group are undoubtedly giving Africa's protected areas a much-needed push, but it would be foolhardy to look to the efforts of so few to reverse the current declines.

#### A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING?

Are we starting to learn that conservation is indeed more about protection and less about consumption? Such utterances are politically incorrect and run counter to our global socio-political and economic systems, of which the present conservation paradigm is a part. These systems are based on unlimited growth, which requires the use of resources and the production of waste. They are sound enough strategies for immediate financial success, but have no long-term vision for true environmental sustainability.

It's also futile and short-sighted to frame the debate as a struggle between the extravagant environmental ideals of the rich versus the subsistence needs of the poor. Biodiversity protection is imperative for the survival of our entire species, rich and poor alike. Without healthy systems, there will be no fresh drinking water, no topsoil, no nutrient cycling and no carbon regulation, let alone wildlife to view.

This, then, leaves us with only one major question: why does conservation and biodiversity protection remain a voluntary exercise based on economics rather than a matter of survival based on principles? 'Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them,' said Albert Einstein. This may very well be at the root of the conservation quandary. **AG**