

INTRODUCTION

The scramble for Eden: past, present and future in African conservation

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There is no doubting the seriousness of environmental and agrarian problems in Africa today in the eyes of the developed world. Human life, natural habitat, soils and species are all thought to be endangered in the continent to an extent never known before. The 'crisis' in Africa, whether enunciated in terms of sheer human suffering and the tragedy of famine, the threat to wildlife or the spread of desertification, is becoming a commonplace of academic and popular culture throughout the industrialised world and, not least, among urbanised Africans themselves. The western media, and television especially have helped to catalyse this development and, while often distorting and misrepresenting the issues, have linked the African predicament, at least temporarily, to the mainstream of European concerns. Even the very name 'Africa', it might be argued, has come to be equated with notions of doom and despondency that have very little to do with older connotations of Africa in the European mind. The more hopeful idea of Africa as a natural habitat teeming with spectacular wildlife has much older antecedents than the image conferred on the continent in the 1980s by famine. Equally the European interest in conserving the wildlife and habitats of Africa has a long history, much of it entirely ignorant of the long-established and successful ways in which Africans have ensured their own survival and that of the soils, plants and creatures which they need in order to live (Worthington, 1958; Darling, 1960; cf. Brokensha, Warren & Werner, 1980; Richards, 1985) and which form a basic part of the texture and meaning of rural, non-industrial existence.

In recent years, however, 'conservation' has come to much greater prominence in the context of the perceived crisis in Africa and it is in the light of this development that the purpose of this book was conceived. Conservation is a much used term, its meanings ranging through a variety of contexts. In the African context, the view that has commonly identified conservation with the protection of species and habitats, with movements to preserve wildlife and wilderness, is giving way to a broader discussion

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linking conservation to the process of rural development and the survival of agrarian societies in Africa. This book is about the manner in which conservation practices and policies in Africa today relate to the process of rural development and social change, and about the significance of past conservation strategies in shaping the way that present problems are viewed and tackled. Prescriptions for environmental management of all kinds, for wildlife, soils and water are now being put forward, mainly by Europeans (e.g. Harrison, 1984), as panaceas for coping with an ecological crisis in the same way in which advisors to post-war colonial governments in Africa put forward 'development' plans, many of which had a substantial 'conservation' component, to deal with the manifest poverty of the continent (see Worthington, 1983). This connection is not an accidental one and the links between conservation and development ideologies and their contribution to the difficulties of Africa today are an important underlying theme of this book.

It is now being recognised in much of the social science literature that the development policies pursued by colonial and post-colonial governments and their 'experts' have not only been economically unsuccessful in many respects, they have also frequently been extremely harmful to the natural environment and thereby to the prospects of human survival in Africa in the long term (Redclift, 1984; Timberlake, 1985). More specifically, much of the work of development economists has been sadly lacking in critical sociological insights into the potential impacts of their programmes on rural African populations (Mair, 1984; Hill, 1986). These 'experts', who have so far had a wide environmental impact upon Africa because of the scope and finance they have been allowed, have often failed to understand not just the social context but the wider ecological context as well. This is particularly important since rural development strategies often amount, in practice, to unintentional forms of environmental policy quite independent of the socio-economic transitions they aspire to achieve (Chambers, 1983). Part of the message of this collection of essays is to warn that many of the prescriptions for environmental management, and for conservation in particular, which are continuing to be made for Africa by development 'experts' may well prove as hazardous for the people and wildlife of Africa as recent policies for rural economic development have been.

Many of those conservationists currently advocating conservation programmes for Africa, whose views are given considerable currency in the immediacy of the apparent environmental crisis of the 1980s, also threaten merely to pay lip service to the social context within which they propose to operate their systems of management (e.g. IUCN, 1980;

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Allen, 1980; WWF/IUCN, 1983). Despite the superficially attractive approach of such international initiatives as the World Conservation Strategy (IUCN, 1980) in seeking to enlist the integration of development goals with conservation objectives and the participation of local people, some of the underlying assumptions they perhaps unconsciously embody are disturbing; at root, the World Conservation Strategy simply implies that the conservationists' vision of society must predominate. But, as Redclift (1984) laments, the World Conservation Strategy 'does not even begin to examine the social and political changes that would be necessary to meet its conservation goals'. Thus, we read in one guide to the World Conservation Strategy, that 'ultimately the behaviour of entire societies towards the biosphere must be transformed if the achievement of conservation objectives is to be achieved' (Allen, 1980). Such propaganda for global social manipulation implicitly arrogates the determination of basic modes of social intercourse with the environment to itself in a way that goes beyond even the most dramatic 'social engineering' ambitions of the colonial state in Africa after 1945.

The fact that most government conservation and rural economic development programmes in Africa have been applied without an awareness of the broader social implications they embody has been largely due to the prominent role of specialists in designing those schemes – most commonly biologists in the case of measures for the protection of species and the preservation of habitats, and economists in the case of rural development projects. The objectives of these programmes have tended to reflect the very narrowly conceived academic or ideological preoccupations of the specialists concerned, and to be framed and dominated by European views of the need for and nature of conservation or rural development. As the state in Africa has become increasingly interventionist, the risks which have devolved from this characteristic relationship between government and 'expert' in Africa, itself a direct legacy of the colonial period, have become more apparent. It has become more and more difficult for rural people in Africa to escape from or to ignore the agrarian and environmental dictates imposed upon them by governments. At the same time, the conservation methods that have been implemented in Africa have been distorted by environmental priorities which have been specific to the predicament and perceptions of the industrialising parts of Europe and North America (Freud, 1921; Graham, 1973; Passmore, 1974; Brandt, 1977). Most of these perceptions have had little relevance to the realities of the environmental changes experienced by most Africans since colonisation. Nevertheless, they have to be understood in order to explain the aims of conservationists and

attitudes towards conservation in Africa today, if only because of the strong continuity between the conservation policies of the colonial state in Africa and those of independent African governments. Moreover, it remains true that Europeans and their ideas exert an undiminished, even increasing influence over the African environment today (Smith, 1980; Mazrui, 1980).

Because of the dominant role of European ideas in shaping conservation policies in Africa in the past and the present, we have to make some effort to understand the wider psychological function of the African environment in the European mind. This difficult task has already been usefully attempted by several writers (see Curtin, 1964; Graham, 1973; Marnham, 1980). The problem is rooted in the nature of the colonial relationship itself, which allowed Europeans to impose their image of Africa upon the reality of the African landscape. Much of the emotional as distinct from the economic investment which Europe made in Africa has manifested itself in a wish to protect the natural environment as a special kind of 'Eden', for the purposes of the European psyche, rather than as a complex and changing environment in which people have actually had to live. The desire to maintain and preserve 'Eden' has been particularly pronounced in eastern and southern Africa, where European ambitions have extended to permanent settlement. Here, at its crudest, Africa has been portrayed as offering the opportunity to experience a wild and natural environment which was no longer available in the domesticated landscapes of Europe. At a practical level, Europeans were able to exploit their technological superiority to control access to the African environment, and to seek for themselves, quite literally, pastures new and a 'promised land'. Whether Boer trekker or Kenya pioneer, the principle was the same: a journey was being made out of the constraints of European economic and mental constriction. The writings of Elspeth Huxley (1959; 1962), Ernest Hemingway (1936) and Karen Blixen (1937) bear eloquent witness to the function of Africa as a wilderness in which European man sought to rediscover a lost harmony with nature and the natural environment (Marx, 1964; Olwig & Olwig, 1980). Much of conservation thinking in Africa, as defined and exercised by Europeans, has therefore been directed to sustaining an image of Africa which forms a part of a European mythology. Europe no longer exerts direct political control over Africa, but the mythology of the African environment and the symbol of Africa as a yet unspoilt Eden continues to stimulate many of those who wish to intervene in the way the environment is managed in Africa. Some of these powerful motivations have been best summed

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up in the writings of Bernard Grzimek, possibly the most influential European post-war publicist of African wildlife:

. . . men are easily inspired by human ideas but they forget them just as quickly. Only Nature is eternal, unless we senselessly destroy it. In fifty years' time nobody will be interested in the results of conferences which fill today's headlines . . . but fifty years from now when a lion walks into the red dawn and roars resoundingly, it will mean something to people and quicken their hearts . . . they will stand in quiet awe, as for the first time in their lives, they watch 20,000 zebra wander across the endless plain . . . is it really stupid to work for the zebras, lions and men who will walk the earth in a hundred or two hundred years' time?
(Grzimek & Grzimek, 1965).

Nature's eternity was symbolised in Africa, with its herds of wildlife, not in the plain artificiality of industrialised urban society in Europe.

This perceptual polarisation of a 'despoiled' Europe and a 'natural' Africa has held sway since the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was in the African colonies that early environmentalists were first able to lobby government and exert an influence inhibiting environmental changes they did not like, long before this was politically practicable in Europe (Grove, 1987). Paradoxically, it was also in the colonial context, in Australia and North America as well as in Africa, that the natural environment was first perceived as threatened specifically by European economic forces and where governments first incorporated conservation as part of their accepted role (Nash, 1967; Powell, 1976; Grove, 1987). The very early development of conservation ideas in the colonies helps to draw our attention to the fact that conceptions of environmental crisis in Africa are also not new. They have an historical dimension which cannot be overlooked (Beinart, 1984; Anderson, 1984; Johnson & Anderson, 1987). Even a cursory examination of this dimension indicates that the idea of a 'crisis' in Africa has as much to do with the history and development of European perceptions of Africa as it has to do with the undeniable reality of environmental degradation engendered directly and indirectly by the penetration of western economic forces, technology and medicine.

The image of Africa as a refuge from the technological society of Europe has frequently been reinforced by the broad notion that the conservation of the African environment is an entirely apolitical affair, a global value that no prejudice could undermine. Thus, another influential crusader for the cause of African conservation, Laurens van der Post, has couched his imperatives in terms of a war uniting all mankind:

We must come to grips with the need for the survival of life on this planet and one of the most essential of these needs is the preservation of large areas of

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wilderness . . . it is a war in which we are engaged . . . it is a subject which is not political, but beyond politics, sociology and material ideals.

(quoted in Vance, 1982)

This naïve and idealised picture of apolitical conservation in Africa, or anywhere else for that matter, is faintly absurd. As a rallying call to humanity to gather round the standard of environmentalism it has proven to be fatally flawed, failing to appreciate that, to rural societies in Africa, conservation is a *very* political issue. Attempts to manage the African landscape for conservation or development invariably involve direct interventions in the relationship between man and his environment (i.e. between rural man and his means of production). The impact of these interventions often extends geographically far beyond the intention of the deliberate plan, being carried through wide networks of social linkage. In this sense any intervention in the rural environment represents a far more serious undertaking to the subsistence economy than it does to one which possesses the safety net of an industrial base. In rural Africa the management and ownership of land, as both the dwelling place and means of production of the majority of the population, therefore lies at the core of the political agenda (Richards, 1983). Consequently, in the essays which follow we set out, quite deliberately, to explode the myth that conservation in Africa can be apolitical in objective or method, and to assert the importance of sociological factors and material ideals in determining the sort of conservation that will be attainable in Africa.

The call for conservation has become ever louder with the extraordinary growth of environmentalism in the West since the Second World War, and more especially over the past two decades. This flowering of interest in conservation has been generated by sharpened perceptions of the prospects for a global ecological 'crisis'. Public concern in western Europe and North America has expressed itself in the burgeoning of environmental pressure groups and the spread of an interest in the natural world as a wider element of European culture (Allen, 1976; Lowe & Goyder, 1983). Part of this new awareness has stressed the vulnerability of nature as a paradigm of man and has emphasised the conviction that society as a whole may be becoming more vulnerable to technologically caused risks (Lowe, 1980). Many of these preoccupations have been global in their scope: nuclear power, tropical rainforest destruction, excessive use of fossil resources, artificially induced climatic changes, and marine pollution are all seen as threatening global ecological stability. While environmental concerns of this type are of much greater longevity than is commonly realised, it is only recently that important elements

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of western society, including some governments, have become so receptive to the language of the advocates of conservation and environmental management that they have been ready to consider the radical interventionist ideas of the 'environmentalists' who have consistently foretold a global ecological crisis (O'Riordan, 1976; Redclift, 1984). It is important to bear in mind that the growth of this global environmentalism has been based in perceptions and values of the environment that are closely connected with the functioning and social dynamics of western society (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982).

It is against this background of the growing influence of environmentalism in the West that the more recent diagnosis of a crisis in Africa needs to be more critically examined. Western environmentalists have characteristically used the threat of 'eco-catastrophe' as a lever for highly interventionist physical and social prescriptions (Cotgrove, 1976; Lowe, 1980; Brass, 1986). In some ways, the crisis in Africa serves as a surrogate for the disaster that environmentalists have long claimed to be threatening. The potency of this crisis scenario has been boosted by the very real spectacle of famine and environmental degradation which has served to shatter – though perhaps only temporarily – the image of the wild Eden in Africa. The imagery of desertification has served an important purpose in this respect: Eden threatens, quite literally, to dry up, through the agency of human misuse. This diagnosis accordingly provides an opportunity for western experts, be they environmentalists or developers, to impose their preferred environmental solutions on rural Africa. In this setting definitions of a broad environmental rather than strictly human crisis allow programmes for the conservation of soil, water, forests and, to a lesser extent, wildlife to prove quite as attractive as any rural development strategy, particularly when combined with the latter (see Timberlake, 1985).

Present-day propagandists for more government conservation have often failed to realise that, historically, the conservation strategies which have found favour in African states have seldom been based upon the participation or consent of the communities whose lives they affect. Thus, conservation in Africa has frequently meant the simple exclusion of rural people from national parks and forest reserves, in the interests of the protection of large animal species and preservation of habitats. Where measures have been introduced that relate directly to systems of land husbandry, such as the soil conservation programmes and resettlement schemes of the late-colonial government, these have been inspired by European notions of the 'improvement' of rural Africa (Beinart, 1984; Anderson, 1984) and imposed upon an often reluctant population. The

majority of conservation programmes, however, have either been directed at protecting the narrow interests of non-subsistence agriculture or have been utilised for exercising an enhanced degree of social control by the state. In other words, the exclusion or the social control of people has been the pragmatic guiding principle if not the original motivation of these policies. For these reasons, the history of conservation in Africa has a legacy which remains important in framing the attitudes of rural communities towards any conservation initiatives now proposed. The use of the term 'alienation' in referring to this kind of conservation says, perhaps unintentionally, as much as needs to be said about its basic philosophy.

Confronted by the reality of famine and immense human tragedy in Africa in the 1980s, the ideologies and programmes of traditional conservationists and modern environmentalists have been found wanting. Just as development economists have had to reassess their plans for Africa in the context of an ecological crisis they had not bargained for, the scientists who promote conservation have been forced to look beyond the narrow confines of their own disciplines. The impact of the diagnosis of crisis in Africa has therefore had the effect of widening the debate on conservation, bringing the social context within which any conservation strategy must be implemented to much greater prominence, its significance having been given emphasis by the essentially human dimension of famine and by the perceived enormity of the environmental task at hand in the continent. The principal aim of this book, then, is to contribute to this broadening approach to conservation in Africa by stimulating a greater dialogue between scientists and social scientists all of whom are concerned, in their different ways, with aspects of conservation. Above all, these essays seek quite deliberately to assert the social context that has been missing from so much that has been written about conservation in Africa.

The essays gathered in this volume therefore share a common perspective, although they are written by people with widely differing academic backgrounds and training, ranging from anthropologists and historians to ecologists and zoologists. The organisation of the book has grouped chapters around themes, and not disciplines. Each of the four parts of the book is prefaced by a short introduction, which seeks to highlight the broader themes and significance of the chapters that follow. The chapters in Part One of the book deal with past and present conservation ideologies in Africa, from the earliest introduction of conservation legislation at the Cape in the mid-nineteenth century to the present debates about the need for new forms of conservation policy. Part Two of the

book considers conservation in the context of wildlife and game parks, and in relation to the African pastoralists who make use of those same rangelands. These chapters examine and question prevailing perceptions of pastoralist land-use, and look at the practical human problems in implementing game park policies. Part Three moves on to look at conservation priorities for rural communities, with chapters dealing with indigenous and imposed resource management systems, conflicts over forest conservation and fuelwood provision, and policies towards soil conservation. Finally, in Part Four, conservation is considered in its present relationship to development. These case studies indicate the pressing need for conservation to be incorporated within the planning and implementation of rural development, the unwillingness of developers to learn from past mistakes, and the ultimate futility of development without conservation. Throughout the book the importance of an historical perspective in understanding the origins and evolution of present attitudes and approaches towards conservation in Africa is given prominence, and the social context of conservation is stressed.

While historians and social scientists cannot offer neat solutions to the problems of Africa, they can contribute to the explanatory work that now needs to be done to try to forestall the recurrence of famine and failed intervention. Although much has been written about the technical side of ecological change and about conservation methods since early colonial times, little has been written that assists in the critical task of integrating an ecological or scientific understanding of the present African environment with an equally sophisticated understanding of the processes of social change that affect the people who live in rural Africa (but see Chambers, 1983; Marks 1984; Richards, 1985). While in various parts of Africa the gross external pressures of war, borehole drilling and enforced resettlement programmes continue to subvert indigenous responses to natural environmental stresses (Timberlake, 1985; Sinclair & Fryxell, 1985), it is likely that the debate about the management of the African environment will continue to be provoked by further images of 'crisis'. Evolving European environmental prejudices are therefore likely to continue to exercise influence over the objectives and the geographical claims which conservation programmes and rural development projects make in Africa. At the same time, while many African governments now consider conservation to be 'a good thing', policies for National Parks, game reserves, forest protection and soil conservation programmes are unlikely to be successfully implemented if they fail to involve the participation and cooperation of the rural people whose lives they will invariably alter.

There exists an absolute necessity for scientists, social scientists, historians, development planners and the governments and agencies they advise, to begin to learn to speak to each other, and to become mutually aware of the full complexity of the social dynamics that operate in rural Africa. Discussions about the future of the African environment must therefore also comprehend a debate about the future of African rural society. This debate will continue to be destructively one-sided until a time comes when African rural people participate directly in the process of decision-making that affects the environment in which they live. In future one might hope that the essential complementarity of ecological and sociological analyses of the African rural environment will be kept firmly in focus.

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