CONCEPTS OF NATURE CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION: THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN METROPOLE AND PERIPHERY

by Donald Gordon

There should be little doubt among lovers of nature that we in the over-industrialised Western world have not yet developed an effective concept for protecting nature from the demands of human society. Nonetheless, we are convinced that our critically flawed approaches must be adopted in any nature-rich, less-industrialized country which will tolerate our rantings. Approaches to nature protection, however, are far from being universally applicable and must be recognized as being deeply rooted in the cultural and ideological perspectives of their creators. Many long-established and well-intentioned concepts and approaches to conservation must be queried, as must some more recent preservationist prescriptions. Critical weaknesses in these concepts arise from the desire to exclude all humans from the nature-protection equation. Such an approach inadvertently decrees that nature protection be relegated to those peripheral areas of little concern to our resource-gobbling society. In order to gain more widespread effectiveness, advocates of nature protection will have to be sensitive to the cultural context of their efforts, and energetically pursue local support by integrating local human concerns.

Before proceeding, definitions of two contentious terms are required. "Conservation" is commonly defined as the management and utilization of any resource in such a way as to ensure its perpetuation.[1] It implies that some degree of human benefit is derived from the use of the resource. Although "conservation" has, since the efforts of Gifford Pinchot, come to be associated with technocratic exploitation, many societies living at or near subsistence levels have developed conservation practices which have been sustained for countless generations.

"Preservation" implies a belief that conservation is too weak a concept, and too subject to co-option by resourcists, to effectively protect nature from depletion; in order to protect nature we must lock it up beyond the reach of any would-be exploiters. Preservation has been defined as "the protection of wildlife and habitats from all human intervention."[2] It seeks to protect nature by separating and externalizing the ever-problematic human factor.

There can be little doubt that, in both the over-developed and less-industrialized worlds, most formal approaches to nature protection are failing or are actively being marginalized. Not only are new parks rarely being created, but existing ones are coming under all manner of attack. Much of this strain is blamed on such undoubtedly important factors as rapidly increasing human populations, the nature-consuming dictates of the international capitalist system, and Western society's predominantly exploitation-oriented concept of nature. Some of this blame, however, must be attributed to the structures and systems created by nature-lovers themselves for the protection of wildlife and habitats, as these systems are not proving sufficiently resilient to resist many external pressures. In much of Africa, as well as other less-industrialized regions, formal nature protection remains built around a system of parks which were imposed during the colonial era. These areas were almost invariably created by whites, for whites. Their intention was not to protect these areas from economic development, but to protect them from the indigenous people. Although the context of nature conservation has changed enormously since the colonial era, the approach of conservationists often has not. Thus, parks have commonly become post-colonial anachronisms, and many are subject to overwhelming pressure from surrounding inhabitants. Since the colonial withdrawal from Africa in the 1960s, nature enthusiasts from over-industrialized countries have been pre-

dicting that parks would soon be overrun by virtual armies of landless "inherently destructive" African peasants. This possibility still exists, but if conservationists end up in a last ditch defence of bio-geographical islands called national parks, it is largely their own fault for arranging the conflict in this way.[3]

Not only are parks a Western concept but, as monuments to the "otherness" of nature, they are also the manifestation of an urban myth. 'Nature' becomes those surroundings which one must drive hundreds of kilometres to reach, and in which humans are but temporary visitors. 'Nature' is guarded and preserved by wardens or rangers (the same terms being used to describe prison guards and soldiers respectively) who, having studied "recreation management" at an urban college, carry out their tasks in pseudo-military garb. The costs of these efforts are, of course, borne by urban-based governments.

Despite profound weaknesses in the park-based approach to conservation, "Make the area into a park!" is the cry of preservationists from Temagami to Amazonia. They may not mean to subject the area to roaming tour buses, but they do mean to stop all human exploitation of an area and hand its control to a national, or even international body. This is indicative of a simplistic understanding of both the function of parks and the needs of conservation. Several of North America's most famous parks, such as Banff, Yellowstone, and the Adirondacks, were created as tourist attractions for economic development. Wilderness was preserved unintentionally.[4]

In Africa, one of the most constant features of environmental protection over the last century has been the increasing centralization and urbanization of control over wildlife and their habitats. Early colonial authorities enacted laws governing the killing of game and soon moved on to designate large areas as game reserves and, later, national parks. The indigenous people, who may have lived in these newly-designated "wildernesses" for centuries and played an active role in the creation of the landscapes which the Europeans so admired, were relocated outside the park boundaries. Vast reserves reflecting the European myth of "untouched Africa" were created, to be controlled by trained managers from government departments. That these areas had appeared to be "wilderness" is a tribute to the success of the indigenous peoples' traditional relationship with the land.

One observer of conservation in Africa notes that antagonism toward national parks by people living around them is universal and will likely last as long as parks continue to be operated under their current philosophy.[5] A handbook on the management of protected areas in the tropics states that one of the two most serious threats to indigenous wildlife is the "alienation of the relevant people from both the use and protection of the wildlife resource."[6] The fact that this has occurred on such a widespread basis indicates that the present approaches are running counter to the long-term interests of nature protection.

Colonially-imposed park policies have persisted in Africa and elsewhere in the less-industrialized world not to preserve nature for the value of nature itself, but for the commercial profits from international tourism. These profits have meant that nature protection through parks has key supporters among the influential urban elite, while it alienates the rural poor who receive no benefits from the existence of parks. One researcher has likened African parks to beef ranches, producing services for consumption by foreign tourists:

> People, the indigenous producers, are no longer seen as a resource and as a basis for development, but as an obstacle to development. Like the ranch, the national park is easier to handle and control than traditional human-use systems, easier to gear toward the overriding national development goal of increased, export-oriented production under firm state control.[7]

Such an approach is obviously not a long-term solution to the challenges facing nature protection. Since central governments have acquired sole control over nature protection, it should not be surprising that conservation is chronically subject to the whims of government policy, both in the over-industrialized and less-industrialized worlds! The park approach to conservation, which alienates local people, effectively ensures that conservation lacks a local constituency. If the creators of the park concept had actively tried to give opportunistic governments a free hand to exploit resources in parks as they wished, they could have produced no more effective means than to ban all settlement or pursuit of livelihood within parks. Lacking local support, the fate of nature is left in the hands of bureaucrats, opposed only by a handful of urban-based recreationalists or foreign tourists.

Profoundly disturbed by the on-going human assault on nature, many articulate voices are advocating the widespread adoption of preservationism. As passionate as these voices may be, the preservationist approach to nature protection has several critical weaknesses. Some of these weaknesses have already been exposed in national park-based conservation, with which preservationism shares several characteristics. Policies aiming at the "preservation" of nature through strictly-defended "preservation areas" would, in fact, be doing a serious disservice to the achievement of effective, more broadly-based nature conservation, in

both the over-industrialized and less-industrialized world.

Although often portrayed as having universal application, preservationism is firmly rooted in the North American experience and relationship with nature, and in North American wealth. Preservationism has developed as an opposing force to resource-hungry, economically expansionist North American culture. As such, it is inextricably linked to the ideology of a consumer society. As Guha shows, Americans' increasing need to visit preserved wilderness areas is a direct consequence of economic expansion; the leisured appreciation of wilderness is yet one more amenity of modern culture.[8] Thus, preservationism works against the achievement of widespread environmentally-sensitive livelihoods.

Preservationism makes the critical error of seeking to exclude humans from the equation of nature protection. Its urban roots are exposed by its failure to consider issues such as responses of, and economic alternatives for, rural dwellers. As it excludes locals, preservationist policies would, presumably, have to be bureaucratically enforced on an unwilling rural population.

Preservationism appears to do nothing to respond to the classic weakness in current approaches to nature protection in which the metropole attempts to set the policy at the periphery's expense and despite its opposition. Large-scale nature protection will never be successful if it is a structure which entrenches and perpetuates social inequities between the metropole and the periphery, but instead will create a peripheral battleground. Many existing preservationist approaches actively marginalize the voice of the periphery; whether one is referring to Temagami or to Africa, locals are portrayed and perceived as being hostile to nature, while only metropolitan nature-enthusiasts have the virtuous answers. Thus, nature protection is often achieved through disempowerment, as areas are preserved where locals have only a weak voice. In order to gain broader success, nature protection must integrate ecological and social concerns, rather than attempting to deal with just the nature component of this equation.

When translated to the less-industrialized world conservationist, and particularly preservationist, aims of Western nature-lovers take on deafeningimperialist overtones that are likely counter-productive to developing solutions to nature protection issues. The prominent American biologist Dan Janzen advocates the securing of control over large regions of the tropics by (Western) biologists. He states that "if biologists want a tropics in which to biologize, they are going to have to buy it with care, energy, effort, strategy, tactics, time, and cash."[9] Such imperialist sentiment weaves its way through the World Wildlife Fund's fundraising scheme "Buy an Acre of Rainforest" and the effort by Canadians for Conservation of Tropical Nature to safeguard a Brazilian forest by buying it. These profoundly North American approaches to nature protection regard locals as mindless destroyers of nature, not as beings subject to an array of external pressures - including those wrought by unsympathetic foreign preservationists.

Statements implying belief in the superiority of North American ideas for nature protection come from surprising sources. The respected American scholar Roderick Nash states that "nature appreciation is a full-stomach phenomenon" and, with extraordinary arrogance, suggests that:

> the less developed nations may eventually evolve economically and intellectually to the point where nature preservation is more than a business.[10]

Canadian naturalist John Livingston may be overstating his case when he states that "there is little or no preservation tradition" in the tropics and subtropics.[11] One might well ask if such a tradition exists anywhere and, indeed, why there should be such a tradition if most North American interest in preservationism is a reaction to over-industrialization.

The desire of some Western nature organizations to impose Western notions of wilderness preservation on Third World peoples may indicate a lack of understanding of indigenous practices that have conserved nature in these areas for centuries. Many animist religions contain both conservationist and preservationist practices, although these have often been damaged by religious conversion and the advent of centralized conservation. The future of nature may, in fact, still be far brighter in the less-industrialized world than in the over-industrialized world. There is less of a tradition and ideology of controlling nature in the less-industrialized world, and the average citizen has far lower expectations of what nature should provide for him/her.

Preservationism is a North American response to over-development which does not translate usefully to those non-Western societies which are not governed by disposable income levels, supply-side economics, and planned obsolescence. The inequities and cultural assumptions inherent in the pursuit of international wilderness preservationism have certainly not gone unnoticed. One environmental philosopher notes:

> While wilderness preservation is truly a significant contribution to world civilization, the question whether this contribution is entirely positive ethically is more problematic. As wilderness is

> generally understood... by mainstream American tradition, and as it often appears... to those Third and Fourth World peoples who actually live on the most intimate terms with wild nature, it may well be just another stanza in the same old imperialist song of Western civilization.[12]

This issue is not limited to ethical implications, but also has crucial operational impacts as well. Many rural dwellers in the less-industrialized world are well-practised in opposing centralized policies which impose foreign, unsuited demands on the use of their environment.

Western cultural approaches to nature suggest that many Western nature enthusiasts may have less to offer to the field of nature protection in the less-industrialized world than we would like to admit. The distinct and unbridgeable separation of humans and "wilderness" in Western thought profoundly colours our cultural approach to nature protection. When John Livingston states that "As far as human settlements are concerned, 'man in harmony with nature' is meaningless gibberish,"[13] he does appear to be basing his view on the Western experience. An ecologist who has worked for twenty years in Africa states:

> I fear that the strong effects of our cultural and social backgrounds ill-prepare us for work in Africa. Perhaps our goals are the product of an elitist Western group and they are not only unsuited but undesirable for conservation in Africa.[14]

Unwilling or unable to derive subsistence from "wilderness," Westerners commonly view it as something to be either utterly tamed or left utterly untouched.

Westerners commonly have an ideological tendency to put a powerful agency in control of the defence of nature, which may also be counter-productive. The World Conservation Strategy (WCS), created by such leading forces in conservation as the WWF and the IUCN, reveals a reaffirmation of the value of centralized conservation. It states that there are two key problems facing conservation. The first is insufficient public participation in conservation and development decisions, while the second is insufficient environmental education.[15] Both of these indicate an understanding of conservation as top-down, centrally- (or even globally) enforced, and centered around parks and reserves.

The value of centralized approaches to nature protection is beginning to be questioned, particularly in the less-industrialized world. A reason for this is revealed in a recent study of common-property issues:

> Natural resource projects in the developing countries that do not actively incorporate the local users will ultimately fail. The notion that national (or even regional) governments in the developing countries can effectively manage local resources is largely without empirical (historical) support.[16]

An African ecologist supports this approach to the field of nature conservation:

> A basic flaw in our philosophy to date has been to assume that a powerful agency could carry out the necessary conservation for the nation; in the long run, conservation will only work when each community has a direct stake in managing the resource and justly benefitting from its activities.[17]

Certainly such a decentralized approach is logical. We trust the wisdom of bureaucrats in so few areas of our existence that it is nonsensical to trust them with the task of nature protection.

If we are to pursue more widespread and effective conservation through local community integration and control, it will likely be unavoidable to use such questionable terms as benefit, management, and even resource. We can talk about nature containing resources which humans can manage and derive benefit from without meaning exploitation by the Western technocratic juggernaut. Even John Muir, one of the United States' greatest preservationists, developed a concept of "righteous management." This approach was consistent with Taoist philosophy and ways of life wherein human communities fit in with the large cycles of nature. It was, of course, eclipsed (with the help of laissez-faire capitalism) by Gifford Pinchot's scientific management for improved exploitation. Pinchot's concept of management is still being praised in the World Conservation Strategy.

Pinchot's concept should not be regarded as the only concept of natural resource management. All societies manage their natural resources. The key question is not whether this management is being done, but who are the managers and what are their aims. The priorities of a corporate resource manager in a laissez-faire capitalist society are profoundly different from a wild vegetable forager in a subsistence community. The disastrous Western ideology of nature as a resource bears little resemblance to the understanding of nature as a resource maintained by a subsistence community whose religious and social structure is built

around sustaining their use of limited resources.

Sceptics might wonder whether non-Western approaches to nature and resources are any less destructive than ours. Some may not be less destructive, but there is little question that many are. The great problem is that the Western approach is oozing rapidly across the globe, often with the support of "nature" organizations such as the WWF. This is starkly illustrated in the World Conservation Strategy where the authors actually managed to juxtapose the following two priority requirements: "9. Allocate timber concessions with care and manage them to high standards; 10. Limit firewood consumption to sustainable levels."[18] Western-oriented exploitation of timber has often led to resistance by local people. The Chipko movement in the Himalayas is a particularly well-known example of local resistance to Western-style exploitation. In innumerable subsistence communities active conservation of natural resources is the only shield between themselves and abject misery.

'Sense of place' is crucial to effective community-controlled nature conservation. In our suburban society, a passion for one's home area is an incomprehensible concept, but it is not in many 'less-developed' societies. Referring to Africa, one scholar states:

> Land, to traditional societies, is not just Real Estate. It is part of an animate entity, it is host to the spirits of the dead, and the origin of the clan is intimately bound up with the origin of the land which they hold in trust. Traditional societies cannot understand how people can sell land or allow it to be alienated, for example, for national parks.[19]

A Maasi elder, during the struggle for control over Tanzania's Ngorongoro Conservation Authority stated:

> This is our homeland, this is where we belong. No matter what happens, even if nothing changes for the better, whether we are allowed to cultivate or not and even if we have to starve and suffer, this is where we want to stay.[20]

Such attachment to the land is a passion which Western conservationists could only dream about encountering in the "developed" world.

Conservation of the periphery by the inhabitants of the periphery is an approach which evidently unnerves our political system. This is likely because it implies peripheral control of resources over which the metropole intends to maintain control. Although the local people's voice always has undeniable legitimacy, it is often ignored, unheard, or actively distorted. Notions of local control are largely omitted from the World Conservation Strategy, which prefers such concepts as "global resource management." In rural areas of the less-industrialized world, indigenous concepts of conservation will undoubtedly challenge our concepts of conservation, just as our structures for conservation have so commonly challenged theirs.

The concept of preservation versus exploitation is too simplistic and dichotomous to have widespread use in guiding our human relationship with wild nature. We live in a complex, ambiguous world, yet too often seek to escape this ambiguity and draw firm, scientific lines to represent the world. This pervasiveness of ambiguity has implications for the unquestionable need for preservation of some areas, and locally-controlled conservation in others. As with so many fields where we attempt to draw firm boundaries, context is crucial; North American desires for preservation or approaches to conservation do not necessarily have roles in the protection of nature in the less-industrialized world. Even more important than the relative merits of these concepts, however, is the crucial issue of who is ultimately controlling the use or preservation of nature. Only when the regional, national, and international periphery gain greater control over the nature which surrounds them will either preservation or conservation have the opportunity to reveal its potential.

Notes:

1. T. Ranger, "Whose Heritage is it?" **Journal of Southern African Studies** (1989), p. 50.

2. Ibid.

3. R. Bell, **Conservation and Wildlife Management in Africa** (Washington: Peace Corps, 1984), p. 100.

4. Roderick Nash, **Wilderness and the American Mind** (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 200.

5. S. Marks, **The Imperial Lion: The Human Dimension in Wildlife Conservation of Central Africa** (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), p. 50.

6. J. Mackinnon, **Managing Protected Areas in the Tropics** (Gland: IUCN and Natural Resources, 1986), p. 97.

7. K. Arhem, "Two Sides of Development: Masai Pastoralism and Wildlife Conservation in Ngorongoro, Tanzania," **Ethnos**, 3:4 (1984), p. 206.

8. Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," in **Environmental Ethics**, 11:1 (Spring 1989), pp. 78-79.

9. Ibid., p. 76.

10. Nash, p. 343.

11. John Livingston, **The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation**

(Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1982), p. 20.

12. Thomas Birch, "The Incarceration of Wildness: Wilderness Areas as Prisons," **Environmental Ethics**, 12:1 (Spring 1990), p. 4.

13. Livingston, p. 40.

14. Rowan Martin, quoted in Bell, p. 15.

15. IUCN, **World Conservation Strategy** (Gland: IUCN, 1980), Section 13.

16. Bromley and Cernea 1989, quoted in Rogers, Ray, **Conservation and Development: The Case of Canada's East Coast Fishery** (Unpublished Masters Thesis, 1991) p. 24.

17. Martin, in Bell, p. 283.

18. IUCN, Section 7.

19. Bell, p. 214.

20. Arhem, pp. 200-201.

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