

## Box Sixty-Five: Commentary from the GWS and Our Members

## Trends in International Conservation: Lessons for North American Protected Areas

Before we think about recent trends in international conservation, especially in the developing world, we might want to consider the following statistics:<sup>1</sup>

If we could, at this time, shrink the Earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look like this:

- ♦ There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere (North and South America), and 8 Africans.
- ♦ 70 would be non-white; 30 white.
- ♦ 70 would be non-Christian; 30 Christian.
- ♦ 50% of the entire world wealth would be in the hands of only 6 people. All 6 would be citizens of the United States.
- ♦ 70 would be unable to read.
- ♦ 50 would suffer from malnutrition.
- ♦ 80 would live in sub-standard housing.
- ♦ Only 1 would have a college education.

Obviously, when one considers these statistics, it is clear that conservation strategies currently employed in the developed world are probably not altogether appropriate in countries where educational levels are low; where basic health services are marginally available, if at all; where basic subsistence is a major problem, where resources utilization is at its most basic level—subsistence farming, marginal livestock herding, cutting of firewood for cooking and heating; and where basic government services are directed at providing its citizens with the most critical of human needs: food, shelter, and health services.

Under these conditions, it will not be surprising that many developing countries suffer from similar problems in relation to their programs for manag-

<sup>1</sup> Taken from data compiled by the United States Peace Corps and furnished in personal communication from the Office of Training and Program Support.

ing their protected area systems. Almost all suffer from exploding population growth, with a significant percentage of their populations under 15 years of age. This means increasing pressure on existing protected areas with the prospect of even greater pressure as these young people reach the child-bearing age. This increase in population means a rapidly expanding agricultural frontier which pushes closer and closer, and, many times, passes the boundaries of already established protected areas. It is not uncommon to see the smoke from slash and burn agriculture emanating from parks and reserves in the developing world, areas which are falling victim to the need among poor people to feed their families. When people are hungry, there is little respect for the boundaries of these protected areas. The extractive industries are aggressively seeking new areas for exploitation. Many of these industries are multi-national or trans-national and practice extractive techniques which would not be permitted in their own countries.

Many agencies in the developing world charged with managing protected areas are under-funded and under-equipped. Rangers don't make patrols because of shortages of vehicles, or, in many cases, sufficient fuel to power the vehicles. This under-capitalization has led to the existence of so-called paper parks, areas which exist in legislation or executive decrees, but which are not managed by government agencies because of the lack of financial resources. Equally critical is the lack of human resources that these agencies can apply to the management of their areas. Most park personnel are not well educated by our standards—many rangers lack even a high school education—and their supervisors and managers, many of whom are university graduates, are immediately thrust into positions of considerable authority without having spent even one day in a protected area. Those assigned to parks or reserves often live under conditions that most of us wouldn't tolerate for a nano-second—bad housing, lack of decent food, assignments away from their families, lack of respect from people with whom they have to deal, little or no equipment with which to do their work. I have called these people the real heroes of the conservation movement.

Oftentimes the agencies with responsibility to manage parks have not developed consistent policies for the implementation of conservation strategies, hampered by government lack of attention or political interference. Finally, there is woefully little science or research being done in developing-country protected area systems, and managers are often forced to make decisions without even basic inventory or projected-effects information.

Given all these problems, it may appear a paradox that some of the most interesting experimentation in the management of protected areas is going on in the developing world, proving once again that necessity is the mother of invention. Let's look at some of the trends that I have observed in the developing world related to protected area management.

To begin with, countries are beginning to shy away from the creation of traditional national parks, recognizing that setting up parks—which implies aggressive management, exclusion of consumptive resources utilization, and purchase in fee of most of the land within the boundaries—is not a rational conservation goal. This trend began to appear in the early 1980s and continues. These countries have begun to experiment with the establishment of protected areas of different categories, favoring those which permit some human habitation within the boundaries, some controlled resources utilization, and which require fewer changes in traditional revenue-generating activities of local people.

Local people, those who live in or near protected areas, have increasingly become the focus of conservation activities. This is perhaps one of the most radical changes in strategy in the developing world. Prior to the early 1970s, most conservationists connected to the developing world considered local people to be an obstacle to management activities. Often, one of the major goals of protected area management was to move local people from the areas which they had traditionally inhabited so that the resources of the area could be managed free from local “interference.” Conservationists and developing-world governments, however, have come to recognize one indisputable fact: no conservation program will ever be successful without the support and cooperation from local people. The alternative—setting a armed ranger every 10 meters on the border of a protected area to keep people out—is neither rational nor practical. Conservationists have begun to seek ways to involve local people, not only in the planning process for protected areas, but also in the decision-making process, hoping to make local people their allies in conservation, not their enemies. This, of course, will be a long process as many of these local people, especially if they are indigenous people, have been excluded from the decision-making processes for decades, if not centuries. We will have to find ways to help them participate in a meaningful way so as not to run the risk of making their participation seem superficial, having little effect on the final decisions.

One way to emphasize this focus is to decentralize responsibility for managing protected areas away from the capitals of developing countries to other organizational levels within the government structure. The idea here is that decisions made at local or regional levels will be of higher quality and more attuned to local conditions than will decisions made in some distant capital. While there is much to recommend in this strategy, there is one nagging problem. Bureaucracies do not willingly surrender authority. What has happened in many countries is that responsibility for managing protected areas has been delegated from ministries to local or regional managers, but the authority to make decisions or to allocate financial or human resources is retained at the

ministerial level. This no-win situation must be overcome if decentralization is to deliver on the promises that its defenders claim for it.

Another experiment that aids the decentralization process is for government authorities to cede management control of their protected areas to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The model that most governments follow in this matter is to establish broad policies within which the NGOs must operate in their management activities. The NGOs then assume active management control of the protected areas. Proponents of NGO management claim certain advantages for this arrangement:

1. NGOs tend to be less bureaucratic than government agencies and therefore are more flexible and efficient in management;
2. NGOs are less susceptible to political influence than are government agencies;
3. NGOs often have access to funding sources which are not available to governments;
4. NGOs can collect funds from users and apply them directly to the protected areas while governments normally have to channel collected funds through the national treasury; and
5. NGOs often have more practical and scientific on-the-ground knowledge of the protected area than do government departments.

NGO management of protected areas is also one of the ways that governments attempt to shift the burden of financing management from the public sector to the private or non-governmental sectors. Since funding is such a critical element for effective management, it should come as no surprise that seeking new ways to finance conservation has produced more experimentation than almost any other area. In some countries, for instance, there has been considerable effort expended to try to make protected areas self-sustaining.

The strategies employed range from the well-known—entrance and user fees, commercial-use licenses and concession permits, visitor “green” taxes, use of volunteers to supplement the activities of civil service employees—to the less familiar: the creation of trust funds for individual protected areas that allow the interest on the capital to finance annual operating expenses; the creation of two-level fee systems, a lower fee for national visitors, and a higher one for international visitors; the marketing of the significance of a nation’s protected area system to international donors who seek to promote effective area management; the establishment of small ecotourism activities which allow revenues to stay in local hands as opposed to major tour operators. All these strategies require an integrated, inter-institutional approach to funding protected areas which will require government agencies to give up some of their traditional authority and enter into agreements with groups from the private and non-gov-

ernmental sectors. The fact that the arrangements are working successfully in some countries proves that it can be done, that government agencies can surrender parts of their autonomy to achieve greater results.

I would like to mention one other emerging strategy that is different from the others that I have discussed in this article. There is a trend to reform traditional economic thinking to give more value to natural resources which are preserved, not harvested, or if harvested, to subtract the value of the harvested resource from the nation's natural resources bank. Let's take the example of a mahogany tree. Under current, traditional economics, the tree has no value until harvested. Once harvested, its value on the open market—let's assume it's \$20,000—is added to the country's Gross Domestic Product and becomes a part of what the country reports to its creditors and to its citizens as economic growth. There is no corresponding subtraction from the country's gross patrimony account because no such index exists. There is no value ascribed to the ecosystem services that the tree and its surrounding eco-niche—probably destroyed during the logging process—provide: nothing for its ability to prevent erosion, nothing for its contribution to preventing floods, nothing for its ability to recharge aquifers, nothing for its activity in filtering and providing clean water, nothing for its role in converting CO<sub>2</sub> to oxygen, nothing for the possibility of its harboring the next miracle drug, and nothing for its ability to give sustenance to the human spirit. Developing countries have taken the lead in trying to think about this problem and to devise a new economic model which will account for these attributes. In some ways, the solution to this issue may be their greatest contribution to world conservation.

The creation and management of protected areas is, as Roderick Frazier Nash once observed, a gesture of planetary modesty, a recognition that we are not the only passengers on the spaceship earth; we share it with millions of other living organisms. Edward O. Wilson, the biologist, has called our affinity for these other organisms "biophilia," an affinity humans have acquired throughout their evolutionary history. If our colleagues in the developing world are successful in their attempts to preserve important parts of our world's heritage, we will all be richer in spirit for their efforts. They deserve our respect and our cooperation.

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[Ed. Note: Rick Smith's essay inaugurates "Box Sixty-Five," a new column of commentary from the GWS office and our membership. We welcome lively, provocative, informed opinion from GWS members on anything in the world of parks and protected areas. Essays selected for publication may be edited in consultation with the author. The submission guidelines are the same as for

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