

Natural resources utilisation as a conservation approach

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As conservationists globally know, the main objectives of *The World Conservation Strategy* are worthy and many of us endeavour to subscribe to the ideals set out in this strategy. There is much to applaud in it but one cannot help feeling at times that its authors were not altogether aware of the harsh realities of conservation in Africa, bedeviled as they are by internecine strife, poverty and depressed economics, let alone the sometimes horrific effects of political turmoil which makes even simple strategies unattainable in Africa. If one hails from Natal/KwaZulu within the Republic of South Africa, these remarks are fully understood, as we live in a province with the fourth highest violence rate in the world.

When I attended the 4th World Wilderness Congress in the United States of America in 1987, I came home troubled. I came to the conclusion then that western conservation practices were becoming less relevant to Africa and particularly southern Africa. One could not help feeling that if the first conservationists to arrive in Africa had come from the east and not the west, the catastrophic sequence of events given emphasis by the *Winds of Change* speech given in South Africa by the then Prime Minister of the UK, Mr. MacMillan, might have been avoided. There just is no comparison between practising wildlife or environmental conservation in Africa and practising it in the United States of America for example.

Two strong forces at work are i) demographic considerations and ii) economics. I want to pause here and reflect on one much publicised conservation drama which supports what I am saying. That is the tragic demise of the black rhinoceros *Diceros bicornis* (Linnaeus, 1758). In a way its demise symbolises what I am saying. Were it not carrying a gold nugget on its nose, and were it not on a continent largely suffering from depressed economies, it would never have been under the pressure it is.

There will be no conservation miracle until we address the needs of the man in the veld, the cattlemen, the rural dweller, the scratch agriculturalist, the lower economy groups. Gone are the days when we can bandy about lofty strategies which are not underwritten by the average person who is daily dependent on the environment for survival: i.e. the man or woman who has to gather firewood before he or she can even cook their porridge.

Every nation is dependent upon the well-being of its physical and biological environment for the long-term contentment and stability of its population. Ultimately, unless there is congruity in the approach adopted by both the political leaders and the scientific community on the importance of the natural physical and biological environment, a recipe for disaster is in the making. Environmental matters span a great diversity of interests and study fields which makes any attempt to set

out a comprehensive environmental policy of KwaZulu a difficult task.

Recent developments in the South African environmental community cannot go unnoticed as they have implications for KwaZulu as she tries to articulate her own environmental policy package. In the international community there has, of course, been the publication of *The World Conservation Strategy* "... which seeks to provide a practical outline to nations throughout the world on problems and principles relating to the sustained use of natural resources" (Council for the Environment, 1986.) However, no doubt encouraged by this document, there has been the publication by the Wildlife Society of Southern Africa of a national environmental conservation policy strategy. Particular developments of interest since then have been promulgation of the Environment Conservation Act, 1982 (Act 100 of 1982 - included in this was the establishment of the Council for the Environment) and the reports of the Planning Committee of the State President's Council and white papers on forestry resources, soil erosion, water resources, industrial development, energy policy and the publication of a national grazing policy. These various developments are a great encouragement to KwaZulu in her effort to place environmental matters on a sound footing, because they begin to provide clarity of the commitment by political leaders and environmental scientists to common environmental objectives.

Clearly the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources is not the only body in southern Africa with environmental responsibility. Indeed, it would be a sad day if that responsibility were ever vested in only one Government Department, simply because the subject matter is so vast and so complex that it requires a multi-disciplinary approach to achieve an understanding of the interdependence between man and the natural systems of which he is part. Thus, although this document does not set out a comprehensive environmental policy for

KwaZulu, it does cover the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Natural Resources in such a way that other departments with similar, or overlapping, responsibilities can prepare their policies in sympathy with this statement.

The most important issue in forming the policy of the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources is the Third World context in which it finds itself. The ever increasing population has meant an increasing pressure on the land. The deprived state of the mass of people in KwaZulu, particularly in the rural areas, seriously affects the Bureau of Natural Resources' ability to protect the environment. The greater proportion of the population rely in one or another way upon the natural resources for survival on a daily, monthly and annual basis. An environmental policy which fails to incorporate or tolerate the daily needs of the people could not succeed. Thus, the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources' policy is heavily influenced and affected by:

- Poverty.
- Inadequate land.
- The need to dispel traditional suspicion of authority.
- Encouraging alternative economic development which does not rely so heavily on the environment.
- The political realities of apartheid and its heritage in South Africa.
- The burgeoning human population increasing on already overburdened natural resources.

Recognising that classical approaches to conservation are destined to failure, a new philosophy has been developed based around three principles.

Since environmental degradation is taking place as a consequence of people trying to survive, it is essential that conservationists wishing to prevent further degradation must provide **alternatives**. For example, where there is a need to protect a forest from exploitation for fuel and building wood, then an

appropriate effort must be made to replace the forest with a woodlot capable of providing the necessary resources.

The second principle of conservation is termed **bottom line**, implying that conservation cannot be divorced from the economy of the region in which it is practiced. If changes to lifestyle and culture are to be made as a consequence of the conservation activities, then there must be tangible benefits accruing to the communities involved. These benefits must encompass the availability of natural resources on a sustained yield basis of those types naturally harvested from the area in question, as well as a proportion of any revenue being made from tourism attracted to the area.

The third principle is **communication**. Conservation in any area will only be successful

if the people of the region see it as to their benefit to participate. Unfortunately, conservation has become an important and emotional issue in the west because the large majority of the populace see it as in their own selfish interest to maintain areas of pristine beauty for the purposes of their recreational needs. People in Third World areas are no different except that the need they have is for survival rather than pleasure. If it can be demonstrated that such survival will be easier through having at hand well managed natural resources that are available for selective harvesting, then the day will be won.

Finally, to reiterate what is implied in the preamble to this paper: there is an urgent need to formulate an all African Conservation Strategy based on the principles outlined above.

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