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A Political-Ecology Approach to Wildlife Conservation in Kenya

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ABSTRACT: Kenya has one of the highest remaining concentrations of tropical savanna wildlife in the world. It has been recognised by the state and international community as a 'unique world heritage' which should be preserved for posterity. However, the wildlife conservation efforts of the Kenya government confront complex and often persistent social and ecological problems, including land-use conflicts between the local people and wildlife, local people's suspicions and hostilities toward state policies of wildlife conservation, and accelerated destruction of wildlife habitats.

This essay uses a political-ecological framework in the analysis of the social factors of wildlife conservation in Kenya. It postulates that the overriding socioeconomic issue impacting wildlife conservation in Kenya is underdevelopment. The problem of underdevelopment is manifested in forms of increasing levels of poverty, famine and malnutrition. The long term survival of Kenya's wildlife depends on social and ecological solutions to the problems of underdevelopment.

KEYWORDS: Political-ecology, wildlife, underdevelopment, national park, conservation.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay we suggest political-ecology as a conceptual framework for evaluating relationships between various factions occupied with wildlife conservation in Kenya (Blaikie, 1985; 1989). Protected areas in the Third World confront both socioeconomic and ecological problems (Allan, 1981; Grech, 1984; Burnett, 1990). They and their environs are being damaged by human encroachment, poaching, inappropriate internal development, mining and prospecting, pasturing, military activities, illegal logging, pollution, acid deposition, invasion of exotic species, and inadequate management of resources. Park authorities have dispossessed indigenous people, while park animals have caused human injuries and damaged properties. Additionally, local people often illegally occupy areas which have been designated as national parks. To solve these problems, viable conservation strategies consonant with local sociocultural values and ecological conditions need to be devised; consequently, conservationists are having to rethink the protected area concept.

Kenya's national parks confront many of the problems facing wildlife conservation in less developed countries generally (Graham, 1973; Lusigi, 1978; Pullman, 1983; Yeager and Miller, 1986; Burnett, 1990; Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990). These problems include accelerating destruction of wildlife habitat, the continued decrease of wildlife species both inside and outside protected areas, conflicts between local people and wildlife adjacent to protected areas, and local suspicion of and hostility to the national government's wildlife conservation policies. People acquire land for cultivation in the regions surrounding the national parks and soon human populations exceed the land's capacity. This leads to de-vegetation, soil erosion, diminishing potential of the land, and desertification. As the parks are affected, animals are forced to concentrate in diminishing and increasingly overgrazed habitats within the parks. Many animals die from starvation while others are poached to near extinction.

Discussions about protected areas in the Third World suffer from bifurcated perspectives and want of a paradigm to guide analysis. One perspective romanticises African parks and wildlife (e.g. Murray, 1993). The 'myth of wild Africa' perceives 'natives' as only a bothersome intrusion into the serious Western enterprise of wildlife conservation (Adams and McShane, 1992). The alternative view is that conservation is little more than a fraud perpetrated by Western biologists who gain large grants, exotic travel and prestigious publications from a crisis of their own making (Marnham, 1981; Adams and McShane, 1992). The much wished for compromise, that conservation must and can justify itself through tourist revenues, lacks credence simply because tourists to protected areas in Third World countries have, most often, neither paid for conservation nor significantly reduced problems of local poverty and underdevelopment (Migot-Adholla, et al., 1982; Lea, 1988; Nash, 1982; Bachmann, 1988; Sinclair,

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1990). There remains, therefore, the need for a mechanism by which the social and ecological values associated with protected areas in less developed countries may be reasonably and usefully discussed. We believe that Blaikie's political-ecology provides one such approach.

ELEMENTS OF THE POLITICAL-ECOLOGY FRAMEWORK

Most scholars agree that familiar explanations – insufficient knowledge and technical training, or population increases, for example – do not adequately account for environmental degradation in less developed countries. Many geographers and anthropologists have sought for a critical framework for analysis of environmental problems in less developed countries (Blaikie, 1985; Watts, 1985; Bassett, 1988). The political-ecological framework focuses on the political and socioeconomic structures and processes which underlie resource use strategies and resource deterioration. The approach combines ecology and political economy and emphasises the evolving dialectics between society and the environment (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1986; Bassett, 1988). The conceptual focus is on the linkages between the agricultural economy, peasants, the nation, and capital accumulation strategies of different interest groups. There are four specific components of the political-ecological model, the later two forming the basis of this paper. They are:

1. an evaluation of changes in indigenous natural resource use strategies as periphery societies are incorporated into national and global economic systems;
2. an evaluation of people's perceptions of, and decision making processes with respect to, natural resources;
3. an analysis of political and ecological relationships at different levels of analysis from the village to the national and the international socioeconomic system; and
4. an evaluation of different group interests or class interactions and conflicts in resource use.

The political-ecological model conceptualises complex, often contradictory, linkages between society, the political economy and the environment. The socioeconomic processes and structural interactions between different groups constitute a chain of causalities which help explain group conflicts and natural resource destruction. For the political ecologist, the causes of environmental degradation need not be found only at the site of destruction but may derive from political-economic relations far removed from the affected areas. The state, in formulating resource conservation policies, is not neutral in mediating various

competing interests. Natural resource deterioration becomes a social issue when actions which cause conflicts among social classes or interest groups are taken to solve these problems.

The approach has been used and proven helpful in explaining resource use problems at a variety of spatial scales in a variety of cultural situations. Blaikie (1985) used political-ecology to study soil erosion in less developed countries. The analysis showed that actions taken to conserve the soil cause conflicts among different interest groups, who react in one form or another to protect their socioeconomic interests. What originally was an environmental issue is eventually transformed into a political process of expression. Watts (1985) studied famine and environmental degradation in Nigeria's Sahel. He indicates that different classes or groups have different explanations and perceptions of famine and resource degradation: state policies and programs to minimise environmental degradation may conflict with the social and environmental values of the local peasants. Bassett (1988) studied Fulani-Senufo land use conflicts in Northern Ivory Coast, where he related resource use conflicts and rural poverty to national policies favouring production of export crops.

Most wildlife conservation research has concentrated on ecological models and technical strategies of conservation. In contrast, there is a paucity of research on the social values which often determine the success or failure of conservation projects (Shaxson, 1981; Yeager and Miller, 1986; Blaikie, 1989). Such social issues as lack of alternative sources of income, unequal land holding, sharing of wildlife conservation benefits and costs, and political constraints placed upon the rural poor are not adequately dealt with (Blaikie, 1985; Wisner, 1989). When, in the long run, ecologically or biologically dictated policies do not work because the social context has been analysed inadequately, force may be used, resulting in the state attempting to protect the local ecosystem from the majority of the people who use it for their livelihood (Marks, 1983; Blaikie, 1989). Wildlife deterioration is eventually blamed on the land users themselves, even though the land-use activities they pursue are often the only survival strategy available to them.

APPLICATION OF POLITICAL-ECOLOGY TO WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN KENYA

The imposition of protected areas in Kenya is a good example of conservation policies and programs created without taking into consideration social factors and people's environmental values. The political and economic extent of Kenyan wildlife conservation has been uniquely colonial and neocolonial, a dictated system serving the interests of the rulers over the ruled (Marks, 1983; Blaikie, 1985). Wildlife conservation was generally detrimental to rural people who were often fined or imprisoned for trespassing or using resources in protected areas.

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A particularly gruesome example is the 1948 demarcation of Tsavo National Park involving more than 2.5 million hectares. The local people, Walianguru, were displaced and their hunting life-style became illegal overnight (Murray, 1967; Lusigi, 1978). Park establishment resulted in intensified anti-poaching efforts and many Walianguru, who were once virtually all hunters, went to prison. The Walianguru have nearly become extinct, much as the Ik of Uganda nearly did, and for much the same reason (Murray, 1967).

The wildlife conservation interest of contemporary Kenya can be classified into four broad categories at increasing spatial scales:

1. Small scale cultivators and pastoralists in regions adjacent to national parks and wildlife reserves.
2. The local wildlife conservation officials.
3. The executive branch of the national government and several of its departments.
4. The international wildlife conservation organisations.

Local Peasants and Pastoralists

The cultivators and pastoralists surrounding protected areas have little or no influence on decision making or the institutions of wildlife conservation (Lusigi, 1978; Shaxson, 1981). Their social values and perceptions of wildlife conservation contrast dramatically with those held by local protected area officials and the national government (Akama, 1993). Peasants, preoccupied by meeting their subsistence needs, confront poverty and famine compounded by destruction of their property by wildlife (Wisner, 1989; Akama, 1993). They therefore cannot afford to grant the goals of long-term wildlife conservation a high priority.

Unequal distribution of the costs and returns from wildlife management is perhaps the most important socioeconomic conservation issue in Kenya (Graham, 1973; Lusigi, 1978; Yeager and Miller, 1986; Kenya Wildlife Service 1990). While revenues from reserves are shared between local and national governments, those from national parks go entirely to the national government and tour operators. While the tourism industry achieves considerable profit, few financial resources are allocated for local development (Sinclair, 1990). The benefits of conservation to households or the community are uncertain, and possibly non-existent. On the other hand, most of the costs of wildlife conservation, such as property damage and the foregone opportunity of using protected land for agricultural production, accrue almost exclusively to peasants and pastoralists. Where people are excluded from resources they have long used, they come to view their loss as the gain of others (Heyer, 1981; Blaikie, 1995).

The most extreme example of shifting the cost of conservation is that the peasants can not protect themselves or their property from wildlife, even in the

face of considerable injury or severe damage to farms (Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990; Akama, 1993). In contravention of the basic democratic value of protecting human life and the dictum that the main function of the state is protecting property, Kenyans are reduced to guarding crops by beating drums to make a noise and making night fires – so that someone else may profit from a tourist who wishes to view and photograph an animal that local opinion would wish dead. Predictably, rural people's attitudes toward protected areas and wildlife varies from indifference to intense hostility (Lusigi, 1978; Yeager and Miller, 1986; Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990; Akama, 1993).

Local Conservation Officials

Local conservation officers, organised and disciplined militarily, implement the state wildlife conservation policies, and are consequently expected to adhere to those policies (Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990). Their duties amount in practice to collecting park fees and protecting wildlife. As underpaid specialists with little chance for advancement in a country with high unemployment, conservation officers are understandably concerned with their job security. Consequently, they have little choice but to enforce conservation policies they have had little opportunity of influencing and no hope of changing.

Worse still, conservation officers practically amount to an army occupying protected areas. In order to avoid pressure to collaborate with poachers, conservation officers are seldom assigned within areas of their own ethnic group. Being in foreign parts, most officers prefer to remain isolated within the protected areas, and they operate outside them only to pursue problem animals or poachers (Lusigi, 1978; Yeager and Miller, 1986). And conservation officers in pursuit of poachers have often been accused of behaviour that would attract international condemnation were the police or army so implicated. Officers have been accused of murdering, torturing, beating and capriciously arresting anyone suspected of collaboration with poachers, when they invade local villages. Whether or not this is true, ethnic differences between conservation officials and local people would alone suffice to exacerbate the peasants' hostility toward protected areas and contribute to the conservation officers' isolation within a fortress-like protected area.

The State

Kenya's government, dominated by its executive branch, for whose political and economic favours various cliques and individuals struggle, speaks for the state (Jensen, 1982; Gordon, 1986; Berman, 1987). Executive influence in matters of wildlife conservation extends to such areas as the enactment of wildlife conservation legislation, and the implementation of new conservation programs that may serve mainly to keep senior officers in salary, or may never get past the

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experimental or planning stages (Cowen, 1982; Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990). The state has the coercive power of governance, and may take extreme measures, including ultimately force, arrest or imprisonment, to ensure that wildlife conservation policies and regulations are not violated.

The national government and international conservationists merged their interests in commercial enterprise with the 1948 formation of the East African Tourist Association. Kenya's success as a tourist destination and the executive's continual need for internationally negotiable currency has dominated the formation of wildlife conservation policy, and has made Kenya's tourism industry Byzantine and possibly corrupt (Migot-Adholla, et al., 1982; Sinclair, 1990). In many respects, Kenya's tourism industry is treated as a state and corporate secret.

By tying wildlife conservation policy to international finance, the executive has limited its ability to make conservation decisions in the best interests of either Kenya's wildlife or its peasants and their local sociocultural values. Examples are Kenya's 1976 termination of sport hunting and its subsequent support for bans on the international trade in ivory. The positions are admittedly controversial, but have had the effect of reducing the peasants' ability to protect themselves from wildlife or to realise any profits from local wildlife resources, and probably increase local support for poaching.

Conservationists fail to appreciate, however, that the state bureaucratic machinery is not monolithic. There are constant struggles and clamours among different government departments and their clienteles in agriculture, forestry, and livestock development. Conservation programs may well involve cutbacks in, for example, cash crop production projects or livestock husbandry programs in which senior civil servants or lobby groups have vested interests (Blaikie, 1985, 1989). Kenya's executive authority is strong and centralised but it is seldom able to make policy by simple fiat.

International Conservation Organisations

International organisations with interests in conservation in Kenya include such groups as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the Max Plank Institute and the New York (Bronx) and Frankfurt Zoos. Indeed, such apparently local organisations as the East Africa Wildlife Society are dominated by foreign membership while Kenya's tourism industry is deeply influenced by foreign and international concerns and their environmental values (Migot-Adholla et al., 1982; Bachmann, 1988; Sinclair, 1990).

Most wildlife conservation policies and programs in Kenya have been initiated with the assistance of international conservation and development organisations. These international conservation organisations recognise the remaining high concentration of tropical savanna game in Kenya as a 'world

heritage' which should not be allowed to disappear but should be protected for future generations (Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990). They tend to romanticise both African wildlife and traditional African cultural values, while seeing contemporary Africans as people who can and should be neglected in shaping domestic conservation policy (Adams and McShane, 1992).

The goals and objectives of many international conservation organisations tend to focus on the narrowly conceived academic and ideological conceptions of conservation specialists, and are framed and dominated by Western environmental values and Western scientific philosophies. A survey of 210 wildlife research programs which were conducted in Kenya from 1968 to 1981 found that nearly all of them focused on the study of herbivores, predators, and bird ethology, animal land use and range monitoring, and wildlife disease and veterinary studies. None of the studies focused on the social and cultural values of wildlife conservation (Yeager and Miller, 1986). These studies have been interventionist in nature, and very few conceptualise wildlife and human interaction as a single ecological system in the tradition established by Myers (1972) and Western (1984).

International pressure and Western environmental values have influenced Kenya's hunting policies and its position on trade in ivory. A more insidious influence, however, has been the effect on bounding protected areas. Statutorily, Kenya's protected areas are understood to be '... under public control, the boundaries of which shall not be altered or any portion be capable of alienation except by the competent legislative authority' (Kenya, 1976). However, many Kenyan protected areas were created by applying a pencil to a map of unknown space with little knowledge of social and ecological realities in the field. Legitimate legislative boundary adjustments to physical and culture realities which thereby lower conservation costs for local people have resulted in outcries from the West that Kenya is abandoning its commitment to conservation (Kenya Wildlife Service, 1990).

Wildlife and Agriculture Policy

Agricultural policy is a realm where national and international socioeconomic forces act collectively to influence land use and thereby set the stage for conflicts between wildlife and peasants. Since independence, Kenya's agricultural policies have aimed at modernising farming techniques by introducing individual, private land tenure and intensive capital investment in the production of cash crops (Migot-Adholla, 1984; Wisner, 1989). The national government continues to encourage farmers to enter the market economy through the growing of cash crops (Cowen, 1982; Jackson, 1985). Needing extra income to pay for farm inputs, household commodities, taxes and school fees, small scale cultivators, with the encouragement of the national government, have expanded their production of cash crops, particularly in high potential areas in Central, Rift Valley, Western and Nyanza provinces.

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The government remains overwhelmingly dependent on the export of cash crops such as tea and coffee for foreign exchange, which is needed to pay for imported manufactured goods, luxury items for urban consumption, and such basics as school books. The dependence on a few cash crops has made Kenya vulnerable to recent world commodity price trends and since the 1970s these have fallen relative to manufactured goods (and in many cases, absolutely) (Webster and Wilson, 1980; Dinham and Hines, 1983; Williams, 1985). Confronting the international economic situation, the Kenyan government has had to encourage expansion of cash crop production, while production of basic food crops such as corn, potatoes, wheat and beans has diminished, shortages have become endemic and food imports which must be paid for with foreign currency have increased (Dinham and Hines, 1983; Wisner, 1989; Heyer, 1981; Migot-Adholla, 1984). Food production should be expanding by 4.5 percent if Kenya is to feed itself in the long run. But, while export crop production has regularly increased, food production has not increased correspondingly. It has been estimated that 30 to 40 percent of Kenya's farm households are now unable to feed themselves even in good years (Dinham and Hines, 1983; Cowen, 1982; Wisner, 1989).

Government agricultural policies coupled with Kenya's rapidly increasing population have created a class of landless people while the growing of cash crops has affected food production (Currie and Larry, 1984; Leo, 1984; Migot-Adholla, 1984; Chege, 1987). There is an acute, and indeed explosive, problem of land shortage for agricultural production in Kenya (Yeager and Miller, 1986; Akama, 1993). Landless small scale cultivators have migrated from high potential to low potential areas. Many settle in close proximity to Kenya's protected areas, which are valued by the government for the same reasons the government values cash crops – the generation of much needed foreign exchange. There, peasants confront conservation officers, largely 'foreign' to the areas they are attempting to protect from human encroachment. The conservation officers have little recourse but to retreat behind ill-conceived park boundaries where they continue to defend protected areas much as an army might defend a perimeter in hostile territory, making infrequent and sometimes bloody incursions into the hinterland, forays which only serve to make the 'enemy' more tenacious and committed to self-defence.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Political-ecology offers a technique for analysing and consequently understanding complex resource conservation problems and the different social values and perceptions attached to resources, including wildlife resources. It does this by identifying the several claimants to those resources and by helping to identify the nature of those claims and the conflicts among them. In the case of Kenya, peasants want to eat, conservation officers want to keep their jobs, the national

government wants foreign exchange, and international conservationists want to conserve the wildlife. All the actors play different and potentially conflicting roles in a situation of rapid population growth. The peasants confront a marginal existence in marginal lands, some of which are already committed to wildlife conservation.

This peculiar mix of social and ecological factors may suggest that there is little hope for the future of the Kenya peasantry or wildlife. Indeed, political-ecological analysis makes it clear that the fundamental socioeconomic context of Kenya's wildlife conservation problems is the country's underdevelopment and rapid population increase. But the analysis also makes clear that there are some grounds for hope. There is little to indicate that Kenyans innately dislike their wildlife and much to indicate that they may be favourably disposed to its conservation so long as the resources are used on a sustainable basis to overcome problems of poverty and hunger (Adams and McShane, 1992; Akama, 1993). Human population expansion stresses all natural resource systems, not just wildlife, and the sooner Western conservationists realise this, the greater the hope for Kenya's wildlife and its people.

The wildlife conservation problem is essentially spatial and economic in nature. Marginal people are drawn into competition with wildlife in their mutual search for alternatives to overcome survival constraints. Anything the state or international organisations can do to assist in improving the welfare of the local people may in the long run help in the conservation of the wildlife as well. Conservation actions may include:

1. Re-evaluation of protected area boundaries to assure that protected areas are physically and culturally restrained to areas actually needed to meet wildlife conservation objectives. Since this exercise is very controversial, international organisations should be asked to participate fully.
2. Giving priority to wildlife conservation projects that view wildlife and human ecological systems as coterminous while diminishing the emphasis on projects that seek to advance science for the sake of science. This might include increasing permit fees for 'scientific projects' to the levels of 'overhead' American universities are accustomed to charging, or asserting more strongly that local people be involved in and understand the nature of scientific research projects.
3. Taking appropriate steps to assure solidarity between local peasants and conservation officers. This might include assuring that some local conservation officers are familiar with the languages and culture of surrounding ethnic groups and/or are trained and assigned fully to improve the relationship between protected areas and local communities. The state should also assure that all searches and interrogations are conducted in line with national and international law standards.

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In addition, the state should take the necessary steps to allay local people's suspicions and hostilities toward state conservation policies. In this respect:

1. Since the state is unwilling to compensate the peasant for wildlife damages, a system should be put in place allowing peasants in the last resort to use force against wildlife.
2. The state must take steps to elevate the value of wildlife relative to other land use practices. This might include:
 - a) A return to safari or sport hunting using local guides (Baskin, 1994).
 - b) Restructuring the tourism industry to assure that more profits accrue to local communities. While revenue sharing between local communities and game reserves is common, national park revenues accrue entirely to the state. Steps must be taken to make local communities fuller partners in wildlife conservation and tourism (Sinclair, 1990).
 - c) International organisations must realise that any development project which reduces pressure on the land (while offering them a meaningful sustenance) works for the betterment of wildlife. Also, any activity that stresses food production over export crop production is probably good for the people and the wildlife, though not necessarily for Kenya's supply of foreign exchange.

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