

**EDITORIAL****Adopting the inclusive conservation approach to ensure a sustainable future for people and biodiversity****Victoria Wambui Ngumi¹, John Waithaka²**¹*Department of Botany and Vice Chancellor, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology, Kenya*²*Member IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas*Corresponding email: john.WAITHAKA@wcpa.iucn.org

Over the years, the framing of biodiversity conservation in Africa has shifted mainly in response to the underpinning perceptions, views, motives, and ideologies. Here, we discuss the main changes in the framing of conservation in Africa and single out the inclusive conservation approach as the model that has the potential to successfully address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss, reduce direct pressures on biodiversity, promote sustainable use, safeguard ecosystems, promote species and genetic diversity, and enhance the benefits of biodiversity for all people.

Traditionally, the idea of limiting human resource use in specifically defined areas to protect biodiversity and ecosystem services seems to have been an ancient practice, common to most cultures. For example, African communities have been practicing conservation for generations, applying their adaptive knowledge and skills and using customary laws to enforce community regulations, exercise control over the land, prevent over-exploitation, and settle disputes over the use of resources. These long-held traditional community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) systems were, to a great extent, disrupted by the emergence of colonial powers at the end of the 19th century.

Across the continent, the colonizers established foreign legal systems of land tenure. Ownership of land was gradually transferred from traditional local authorities to the state domains to enable colonial authorities to exploit African lands and resources. National parks were established through the forceful removal of local people from their lands. Oppressive wildlife laws were introduced to legitimize the unjust treatment of Africans and justify the expropriation of their lands. Imposing foreign rule brought about the erosion of indigenous cultures; weakened long-established traditional natural resource management systems; introduced wildlife management laws that failed to address the social and ecological contexts within which wildlife had thrived; and created conflicts arising from the transfer of power from traditional governance systems to a centralized power base. Due to ruthless law enforcement, Africans were unable to coexist with wildlife. These and other factors worked together to trigger a widespread struggle for independence in the middle of the 20th century. Central to the struggle was to regain Africa's sovereignty over their lands and resources, destroy the racist



ideology of the imperialist enterprise, and bring to an end the foreign authoritarian and oppressive bureaucratic systems. From the perspective of most indigenous and local communities, political independence did not achieve much in the area of conservation as the strict, top-heavy, hierarchical, and single-visioned colonial conservation policies and institutions were maintained.

Although the African Union (AU), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and other players have made significant efforts to promote people-friendly conservation approaches, conservation in Africa has remained a contention due to positions taken by influential and powerful partners on issues of sustainable use (see, for example, Allen and Edwards, 1995). Whereas the sustainable use principle is one of the three objectives of the CBD and is affirmed by the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (ACCNR), Africa has remained encumbered by philosophical sustainable use debates that have undermined the development of practical conservation policies since the early 1990s. As a result, many countries have failed to use the range of options necessary to effectively tap nature's multiple benefits or address biodiversity threats at a scale sufficient to prevent or reverse any negative trends. Unfortunately, local communities neighboring protected areas are among the poorest people in Africa.

Despite these challenges, there is hope for a better future for people and biodiversity. In the 1980s, a community-based conservation approach began to emerge in a few countries in southern and eastern Africa, which brought about a dramatic shift from the centralized governance of wildlife. This approach effectively changed the status of wildlife on private and communal lands from an economic liability to an asset, resulting in a profound recovery of wildlife populations and bringing about the growth of wildlife-based enterprises in the region (Child, 2004). In Kenya, local communities were able to earn an income in areas such as the Kajiado District, where efforts to integrate the management of Amboseli National Park with local livelihood interests led to the crystallization of a new "community-based" conservation paradigm (Western et al. 1994). Since then, community conserved areas have become an integral part of Kenya's conservation landscape, identity, heritage, wealth, and future. In addition, community-based approaches are providing strong economic incentives and a heightened rationale for nature conservation.

However, besides biodiversity conservation, the African landscape has many competing land-use interests, which include agroforestry, recreation, water resources planning, agriculture, fisheries, transportation, mining, settlements, and other commercial interests, which are pursued by diverse groups that connect differently with nature or the natural areas in which they live. These stakeholders include indigenous peoples and local communities; private landowners; conservationists; policy makers; recreational users; residents; local businesses; agriculturalists; researchers; governmental and non-governmental organizations; among others. Putting all these interests into consideration, it becomes obvious that biodiversity conservation is unlikely to succeed without the support of the relevant stakeholders. Therefore, achieving inclusive conservation requires the development of a participatory process for building a shared understanding of landscape management challenges and the role



of the various stakeholders in addressing them for the benefit of all. By adopting a pluralistic and democratic approach to conservation, inclusive conservation brings in new perspectives, adopts a holistic approach toward biodiversity conservation, creates buy-in, reduces non-compliance, promotes environmental stewardship, balances competing for social and economic demands, promotes human well-being, empowers the weakest and creates synergies and collaboration between the key actors through policies that accommodate multiple visions. This framework helps to construct pathways toward a more sustainable future for people and biodiversity and hence has the potential to achieve socially relevant, economically productive, and environmentally sustainable outcomes (see Stolton and Dudley, 2010; Brockington et al., 2008).

The idea of an inclusive approach to conservation is not new. Since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, and even more since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, the international community has called for the adoption of conservation and development goals that are based on the principles of equity, inclusivity, and ecological sustainability. Consequently, rights-based approaches to conservation and development are gradually becoming the standard *modus operandi*. For example, through the ACCNR (AU 2003) and the AU Agenda 63 (AU 2015), the continent aspires to create a prosperous Africa that is just, equitable, and inclusive and acknowledges that democracy, good governance, and the rule of law are essential for sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection, and the eradication of poverty and hunger.

In conclusion, inclusive conservation adopts a people-centered approach to conserving and managing biodiversity. It demands the maintenance and enhancement of our core conservation goals, equitably integrating them with the interests of all affected people. In this way, the synergy between conservation, the maintenance of life support systems, and sustainable development are forged.

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