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International

Eco-Apartheid

It's Africans versus Elephants & Environmentalists

By Ike C. Sugg

Developing nations regularly complain that "the rich are more interested in making the Third World into a natural history museum than they are in filling the bellies of its people," according to Dr. Mostafa K. Tolba, executive director of the United Nations Environmental Programme. It is unfortunate that his opening address at the March, 1992, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) meeting in Kyoto, Japan, did not receive wider media coverage. Dr. Tolba, the top official at the greenest branch of a very politically correct UN, recognizes what few in the environmental establishment care to admit—current policies to protect wildlife are harming humans.

"That complaint also goes to the heart of CITES' mission," Dr. Tolba said. "CITES does not provide a legal basis for turning the world into a zoo or into a museum. The philosophy that underlies it is one of conservation and utilization, rather than outright preservation." Dr. Tolba went on to remind the delegates of the 112 member nations (and the far more numerous representatives of environmental groups) that the "millions ... whose voices will not be heard" want a better life, and "cannot be denied the right to use their natural patrimony" to attain that goal. Much of Dr. Tolba's concern is directed at the 1989 CITES ivory trade ban, which has eliminated most economic incentives for people to conserve elephants. Yet despite Dr. Tolba's laudable efforts to put wildlife conservation into a human rights perspective, CITES eschewed petitions to relax the ivory ban, thereby continuing its simplistic policy of "four legs good, two legs bad."

While the United States and the European Community staunchly defend the ivory trade ban, London's *Financial Times* recently dubbed the policy "eco-imperialism" for reaching across oceans to impose Western biases upon people who must suffer the consequences. An unsigned editorial asked, "How would readers of this newspaper like to have an elephant in their garden? What would they feel if they had to live off what that garden produces?" Yet there is nothing new about such impositions by white Europeans on black Africans in favor of African wildlife.

For years before apartheid became formally institutionalized in South Africa, colonial practices throughout sub-Saharan Africa placed severe restrictions on where black Africans could live and how they could make their living. It was, in the words of economist Walter Williams, a "war against Capitalism" waged ruthlessly across the continent. This brutal oppression, which denied economic freedom just as surely as it did other human rights, assured that Africa would remain "safe" for whites, by confiscating the good land and creating a cheap labor pool for colonial farmers and miners. Today, many Western nations want to make Africa "safe" for animals, at the expense of allowing Africans to own and develop their indigenous natural resources.

Colonialism peaked during the Victorian era. It was during this period that the first game parks were established, and Africans were forcibly evicted from their homelands—first to make room for whites, then to make room for animals. In 1884, South Africa created Kruger National Park (only 12 years after Yellowstone National Park was designated in the U.S.), the first of many on the continent. According to nature writer Roger McCoy, South Africa's national parks were designed and administered "to protect African wildlife from people." Kruger Park headquarters, Skukuzu, is ironically named for Kruger's first warden. *Skukuzu* is the Zulu word for "the man who changed everything."

In time, things changed elsewhere, and radically. As Moringue Parkipuny, a leader of the East African Masai tribe, noted at a recent indigenous people's conference in the U.S., "Kenya and Tanzania have pushed out people who had lived in harmony with the animals in the name of defending the new national parks." The Masai lost at least 25,000 square kilometers to the Tsavo, Serengeti, Masai Mara, Ngorongoro, and Amboseli parks. Conservationist Rupert Isaccson has written in *Green* magazine about the Ik tribe of Uganda and how their lands were expropriated in 1958, but they were not given alternative lands on which they could make a living. Consequently, Isaccson says, the Ik themselves are on the verge of extinction.

Western preservationists have long argued that nature preserves are essential if we want to save the last vestiges of "our natural heritage." One of the most effective rationales for establishing such preserves has been the specter of wildlife extinctions. The World Wide Fund for Nature and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources—two huge, Western environmental organizations—have been instrumental in having several African game parks designated as "off limits" for resource exploitation because they harbor protected species.

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The argument for establishing parks is predicated on the Victorian notion that mankind is not part of nature, and that therefore he must be segregated from nature if nature is to be protected. But in poorer countries with people hungry for arable land and scarce food, the damaging effects of this primitive view are hardest felt. As several African countries are home to the fastest growing human populations in the world, competing with wildlife for limited land, water, and space, the idea that unfettered wilderness can be protected from human encroachment is naive, if not misanthropic. In order to cordon off "wild" places to preserve what is ambiguously called their "intrinsic value," humans have to be moved elsewhere.

Banishing a nomadic and pastoral people from their ancestral lands alienates them from wildlife, physically as well as psychologically. To people whose lives have revolved around living off the land for millennia, the resentment bred by the "no trespassing" decrees of the past colonial governments in Africa is matched only by modern "no hunting" prohibitions enforced by West-dependent neo-colonial governments. Yet divorcing mankind from nature is not only a threat to people living precariously impoverished lives, it also hurts the flora and fauna intends to protect.

Kenya's Tsavo National Park is a case in point. Due to Kenya's burgeoning human population and the encroachment of agriculture, wildlife began to move into Tsavo years ago. By the late 1960s, Tsavo was vastly overpopulated with elephants, each of which can eat up to 300 pounds of vegetation in a single day. However, when a team of Ford Foundation scientists visited the park at the time suggested that overpopulation was a problem, they were forced to resign by their preservationist superiors. Many well respected ecologists recommended action, before the elephants destroyed the habitat on which they depended.

Kenyan policy, however, perpetuatedVictorian preservationist ideology, insisting that man should "leave nature to run its own course." But as prominent ecologist Norman Meyers lamented, Tsavo was already "an unnatural situation"—a government- engineered disaster waiting to happen.

In 1970, drought, along with huge, government protected herds, turned Tsavo into an 8,000 square mile desert. 15,000 elephants starved to death in 1971—countless lesser kudu, gerenuk, dik dik, and giraffe also died. Kenyan officials, blythely trying to avoid responsibility, attributed this massive die-off to "poaching". As the drought took its toll, millions of Africans went hungry. Vast quantities of meat were wasted on hyenas and vultures, while, according to Meyers, the government said "you cannot have one single forkful of all that meat, because this is a park." Once home to the Masai, Watta, Kamba, and Waliangulu tribes, Tsavo was now a wasteland, a symbol of resentment for the people whose ancestors had prospered there.

After the initial famine, the dispossessed tribesmen had gradually begun re-entering the park (in spite of government edict), initially taking only what they needed for food. But they were followed by large scale incursions of game hunters and scavengers searching for valuable ivory and rhino horn that was there for the taking. Under the combined pressures of drought and hunting, Tsavo lost 30,000 elephants and at least 5,000 rhinos in the early 1970s. In 1974, Kenya's ruling Kenyatta family officially banned hunting in Kenya, ostensibly to preserve the elephants. It was no accident, though, that the Kenyatta's were operating the most lucrative ivory exporting firm in the country. The government's ban on hunting was a thinly veiled attempt to monopolize the illegal trade in valuable wildlife products. As Gary Stewart reported in *Petersen's Hunting*, "with hunters removed from the bush, the [Kenyatta family's] poaching team had a free hand." Further, the safari industry, which had employed thousands of native Kenyans and created wealth by selling goods and services to sport trophy hunters (a trophy elephant can generate $30,000 in local revenues), was destroyed. And the poaching problem, which spurred the CITES 1989 ivory ban, was born.

Tsavo's experience with poaching was perhaps the worst case scenario, but it is not atypical of the effects parks and hunting bans have had in Africa. Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, among others, have had similar problems. After failing to protect wildlife with loaded guns and hollow decrees, these countries have since liberalized wildlife laws. Kenya, however, has not learned this lesson. Hunting is still illegal in Kenya.

Barred by government from earning a living off wildlife resources, Kenyans don't manage wildlife. Because Kenyans have no financial stake in wildlife, there are no incentives to conserve wildlife resources. As a result, Kenya's elephant population has plunged from 140,000 in 1970 to an estimated 16,000 today.

Zimbabwe, by contrast, is leading the fight to establish a new conservation ethic in Africa. They call it "conservation through utilization," and it is based on the proposition that wildlife must pay if they are going to stay. As one tribal chief in Zimbabwe recently told *National Geographic*, "For a long time the government told us that wildlife was their resource. But I see how live animals can be *our* resources. *Our* wealth. *Our* way to improve the standard of living without waiting for the government to decide things. A poacher is only stealing from us."

This property rights-type approach to wildlife conservation has given Zimbabweans sufficient incentive to protect wildlife. By conserving wildlife habitat, and defending their valuable wildlife stocks from those who would steal it from their rightful stewards, Zimbabwe's elephant herd has increased from 30,000 elephants in 1979 to over 70,000 today. Zimbabwe is integrating economy and ecology, in stark contrast to the adversarial policies still prevalent in most of Africa.

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The legacy of colonialism runs deep and continues to thwart self-determination and community based wildlife conservation in Africa. Opting for preservation, CITES has chosen to disregard human rights and commercially based conservation efforts. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife service recently considered a proposal to list 480,000 (of 610,000 continent-wide) African elephants as "endangered" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Bwana-be's in the American environmental establishment objected; they wanted all 610,000 listed, even though it is widely known that roughly half of Africa's elephants are in stable or increasing populations. Such a policy would have outlawed American elephant hunters in Africa, thereby depriving Africans of tens of millions of dollars a year in economic benefits.

Of course, the environmental establishment is not beholden to native Africans, but only to its own narrow agenda. In the midst of the worst drought to hit southern Africa this century, Craig Van Note of the Washington, D.C.-based preservation group Monitor, recently asserted that culling overabundant wildlife to feed starving Africans "is a short-sighted, short-term reaction to the drought. All of the wildlife in Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Malawi could not feed the people of those countries for more than a day or two." Even if this were so, any food for a starving family is a blessing, even if they know it won't last. But the policies are not really about human welfare. As Cynthia Moss of Kenya's Wildlife Service confessed in 1990, the first year of the drought, "I would rather see no elephants than elephants being culled ... It's morally unjustified to kill elephants." Even to feed people?

Government platitudes aside, Kenya's failed policies are not really based on an animal rights philosophy, but rather on the cynical use of such rhetoric to attain good public relations in the West, and the foreign aid good public relations attracts. As Richard Leakey, the Director of Kenya's Wildlife Service, recently admitted, "We've been active in promoting a concern for elephants and popularizing the emotional side of conservation ... Kenya would get very bad press if we were to take a position diametrically opposed to our present stance." And it's no wonder; Western policy makers do appear to care a great deal about the future of elephants. A U.S. State Department official, asked about the morality of letting people starve to save elephants replied that, after all, "there *are* more Africans than there are elephants."

Cognizant of the misanthropic implications of preservationism, the organizers of the "Earth Summit" last June billed the conference under the hallmark of "sustainable development," the new buzzword of the environmental establishment. According to the *The New York Times*, the proposed Convention on Biological Diversity (one of the two major treaties proposed at the summit, and one President Bush opted not to sign) embraced "a new concept;" namely, that "conservation will fail unless it is integrated with human activity." This sounds good on paper, but the environmental establishment has been undermining truly sustainable development at every turn. The rejection of Zimbabwe's approach to conservation demonstrates this in stark terms; and certainly the concept is anything but new. Only the adoption of the conservationist rhetoric by extremists constitutes any real change.

Cloaked in the rhetoric of sustainable development, proponents of the biodiversity treaty nonetheless heralded the agreement as a breakthrough. They argued that the treaty would reconcile the imperatives of economic development with the need to protect the planet's innumerable species of life forms from extinction. Yet in a revealing letter to President Bush urging him to sign the treaty, Senators John Chafee (R-RI) and now Vice President-elect Albert Gore (D-TN) advised the President that the "use of resources, insofar as it is consistent with the primary goal of conservation, is also a worthy objective, but it should be very clear from the terms of the agreement that the conservation of biological diversity is paramount." Clearly, treaty backers believe that human needs come second to ill-defined environmental concerns.

What should be even clearer is that "sustainable use," a phrase appearing in dozens of places throughout the treaty, is a red herring if "use" is an ancillary, albeit "worthy," objective. Indeed, the second-to-last draft of the treaty stated clearly that the greatest value of biodiversity is its "intrinsic value." This romantic statement was omitted from the final draft hammered out just a few days later, as was the following language appearing in the preamble, " ... other forms of life should exist independently of their benefits for humanity."

Reporting about the proposed treaty, *The New York Times* wrote, "Historically, conservationists have set aside nature preserves and let nature take its course. Despite this, species loss and ecosystem damage have continued apace." But the story failed to mention that, in one of the few explicit provisions of the treaty, more of these preserves would be mandated. Is it any wonder then that the Third World feared that the treaty represented a threat to their economic autonomy, and thus demanded billions of dollars in foreign aid as compensation?

Thus, after over a century of exploiting our natural resources in order to create the economic success that is the United States, we are now telling the undeveloped world not to develop as we did. Essentially, preservationists in the public and private sectors are cajoling poor people in other nations into forgoing economic opportunities that we in wealthy nations have long enjoyed. It is hypocritical, if not imperialistic. And, most unfortunately, it is about to become law.

Bill Clinton and Al Gore were outspoken critics of President Bush's decision not to sign the Convention on Biological Diversity. There is little chance that the new administration will risk being dubbed the foremost "global environmental villain" by 150 preservationist groups, as George Bush was. So, despite the rhetoric of sustainable development, the U.S. will almost certainly codify a treaty that puts animal preservation above human well-being. Instead of allowing the managed use of natural resources, it will create a massive, global welfare system transfer, institutionalizing Third World dependence on the West. Rather than encouraging economic growth and self-reliance, the biodiversity treaty will globalize a Great Society brand of cyclical dependency. Instead of fostering the sustainable utilization of wildlife, it will sacrifice the future to preserve the past, facilitating the transformation of the Third World into a natural history museum.