Environmentalism in South Africa: A Sociopolitical Perspective

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I. Introduction

South Africa is a country that has undergone dramatic political changes in recent years, transforming itself from a racial autocracy to a democratic society in which discrimination on racial and other grounds is forbidden, and the principle of equality is enshrined in the Constitution. These political changes have been reflected in the environmental sector which, similarly, has transformed its wildlife-centered, preservationist approach (appealing mainly to the affluent, white minority), to a holistic conservation ideology which incorporates social, economic, and political, as well as ecological, aspects.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the South African environmental movement has moved dramatically away from its former elitist image, and made enormous strides in reaching a far broader spectrum of society, the transformation process of the environmental sector has not been entirely smooth or without serious setbacks. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that South Africa's long and bitter history of racism and racial conflict dating back to the earliest days of white settlement in the mid-seventeenth century, has resonated down to the present, often negatively influencing the attitudes of historically marginalized communities toward environmental issues. The cumulative effect of racially discriminatory laws and punitive conservation regulations has been the gradual but relentless alienation of blacks from the environmental sphere, and the growth of hostility to conservation issues as defined by the mainstream.

These problems represent a legacy from the past that still presents obstacles today, as evidenced by several recent environmental con-

flicts. One particular controversy, which vividly illustrates the "people versus nature" dilemma that often faces South African environmentalists, involves the right of a poor rural community to stay in the state-owned Dukuduku Forest in the St. Lucia Nature Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. The forest, which contains the country's largest remaining patch of coastal lowland forest, has been under threat for years by invaders who have destroyed large tracts of land for housing and agriculture. A small number of forest dwellers have ancestral rights, but the majority of people have settled there only in recent years. Fueling the land invasion is a shortage of land for poor black farmers, widespread poverty, and unemployment. While the government is attempting to provide a negotiated solution through the purchase of two adjoining farms for the purpose of resettlement, as well as involving the resettled inhabitants in ecotourist projects in the forest, the problem — and the land invasion — continue to grow. With violence erupting in the forest to the extent that police and the military had to be sent in to restore order, the problem has escalated to a point where a peaceful and constructive solution appears unlikely in the short term.

The conflict at Dukuduku embodies the complexity of South Africa's environmental problems as well as the difficulties faced by a government burdened with an acute backlog of socioeconomic problems. It is a complexity that can only be understood in terms of this country's environmental history.

A. The Late Colonial Era

The roots of South African environmentalism may be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when the first conservation organizations were established. While it should be acknowledged that precolonial ecological practices and ideas have a long and rich history, and that they are deeply embedded in customary practices and tradition, the establishment of a formal conservation ethic may only be traced back to this period. From the time of the formation of the first environmental organizations, however, black South Africans were forced by the prevailing political realities and pervasive racial prejudice to operate outside mainstream environmentalism. Already deprived of their ties to the land by the process of conquest, colonization, and discriminatory legislation, blacks inexorably became alienated from the natural environment as well as from the nascent environmental movement.

Like their counterparts in the United States of America (such as the Boone and Crockett Club and the Sierra Club), South African conservation organizations essentially protected nature for the privileged. Hence, organizations such as the Natal Game Protection Association (1883), the Western Districts Game Protection Association (1886), and the Mountain Club (1891) were comprised of the white elite of the day, whose agendas were dictated by their narrow class and racial support bases, and thus neglected or were often hostile to the interests of blacks. This was clearly demonstrated by the efforts of the early game protection associations to watch over their sport by preventing Africans from subsistence hunting.

This period also witnessed the foundation being laid for a system of protected natural areas which, during the twentieth century, would develop into national parks and provincial game and nature reserves. From the start, however, the establishment of protected natural areas went hand in hand with the forcible eviction of Africans resident in those areas, and the prohibition of subsistence hunting on their traditional lands. From the beginning also, the concept of a national park was one which was uninhabited and catered to mobile, affluent visitors, and from which the indigenous people (who were perceived as environmentally destructive) were excluded, except to serve in a menial role.

As David Anderson and Richard Grove have pointed out, the conservation ideology being forged in Africa at the time incorporated the Eurocentric focus of colonial society, along with its tendency to idealize and preserve the natural environment.[1] White privilege, power, and possession, as extensions of the colonial political paradigm, formed the foundations of this ideology, as did the perception of blacks as environmentally destructive. European perceptions of Africa and Africans as "uncivilized," and whites as harbingers of progress and civilization, were incorporated into the developing conservation ideology. This credo, as a reflection of the social attitudes of white cultural superiority, thus also incorporated the subordinate status of blacks within society. As elsewhere in Africa, this ideology took root in South Africa and was bequeathed to the conservation organizations that were to become active during the twentieth century.

B. The Era of Segregation, 1910–1947

One of the most striking features of a country as politicized as South Africa is that conservation and politics have traditionally been perceived as rigidly separate spheres of interest, with both politicians and conservationists exhibiting considerable reluctance to "meddle" in the affairs of the other. In part, this attitude grew from the apolitical perception of environmental issues held by both parties. It has also stemmed from the fact that most politicians have traditionally viewed conservation as having little, if any, relevance in the political sphere. Consequently, they have often treated environmental issues in a dismissive fashion. Today, however, few South African environmentalists would deny that there is an integral link between conservation and politics (given that the issue of access to valuable natural resources is a crucial environmental issue) and that political mechanisms govern access to these resources. In addition, the link between political and environmental literacy on the one hand, and between political powerlessness and an ill-informed, apathetic public on the other, is widely acknowledged.

Since, historically, political power in South Africa has been arrogated to one sector of society on the basis of race, political factors gain even greater significance when documenting and analyzing the development of environmentalism in the twentieth century. Thus, given the inextricable links between politics and the environment, it is essential to understand the process of the relentless disempowerment of blacks since 1910 as a crucial element in the continual alienation of blacks from conservation. It was in that year that the political union of South Africa took place, ending all hopes of a gradual move toward the democratization of society. With the exception of the Cape, an exclusively white franchise was agreed among the English colonial areas and the former Boer republics, and in the ensuing decades, the country moved towards white domination in the economic and political spheres through legislation which furthered the pattern of land dispossession and the political and economic marginalization of blacks. These laws not only caused widespread suffering and hardship, but perpetuated the process of spiritual and physical estrangement of Africans from the land, which had begun during the colonial era.

Outside the political arena, blacks experienced a deepening sense of alienation from the environment as a result of their deliberate exclusion from the enjoyment of protected natural areas. This exclusion was

particularly evident in the national parks, where blacks were only tolerated in the role of menial workers and seldom as visitors, despite the fact that the National Parks Act of 1926 stated that national parks had been established for the benefit of the South African public as a whole.

Black exclusion from the mainstream environmental movement was especially evident during this period, as well. From its small beginnings in the late nineteenth century, the growth of the mainstream environmental movement quickly gained momentum during the twentieth century. Several major national nongovernment environmental organizations (ENGOs) were established in the first half of the century, among them the Botanical Society (1913), the Wildlife Society (1926), and the National Veld Trust (1943), a soil conservation organization. However, despite the fact that the environmental movement was beginning to diversify, the development of mainstream organizations remained strongly influenced by the elitist, wildlife-centered, preservationist approach of their predecessors. The aims and activities of these organizations emphasized the preservation of endangered fauna and flora and the protection of the natural environment. However, since the movement was responsive only to the interests and perceptions of its narrow membership base, it remained hostile to the interests and perceptions of blacks.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that a separate black environmental organization, the Native Farmers Association, was established in 1918, and that its concerns, unlike that of white conservation organizations, revolved around issues perceived to be of greater relevance to its black constituency, viz., access to land, soil conservation, and better farming methods. Another reason for black exclusion from the mainstream environmental movement lay in the blatant racism of the soil conservation movement, which dominated the environmental scene during the 1940s. The main organization operating at that time was the National Veld Trust which ensured that membership was open only to whites or, as they put it, "South African persons of European descent."[2] However, it was not only the nongovernment sector that targeted its resources and soil conservation literature exclusively at the white public. The government's approach to soil conservation also betrayed a racial bias. The conservation and education services provided by the Division of Soil Conservation and Extension in the Department of Agriculture were aimed solely at the white farmer, while the conservation activities of the Land Service Movement, which

was controlled by the Department of Agriculture, was open only to white youth.

II. Apartheid and Conservation, 1948–January 1990

The story of conservation during this era (like the apartheid era history of most other sectors of society), was an unedifying and sometimes sordid tale of collaboration and cooperation between the apartheid government and the mainstream environmental movement.

A. The Role of Government

The victory of the National Party in 1948 was not only the victory of racial separatism but also marked the beginning of a period of extreme politicization of environmental conservation and the institutionalization of environmental racism. To the government, conservation was merely one more sphere of activity that had to be controlled and forced to conform to the dictates of apartheid ideology. This was very evident in the government's attempts to enforce segregation among ENGOs. Not content with a plethora of legislation that controlled and attempted to prevent social interaction between black and white, the government tried to ensure compliance with its racial policies from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) — including conservation bodies—during the early 1960s. Notwithstanding the impracticality of segregating NGOs, such as scientific bodies with a small membership, the government view held sway, and many NGOs altered their constitutions to exclude blacks.

More damningly, a body of laws was passed which further disempowered blacks and rendered them even more vulnerable to discriminatory action. By ensuring that genuine participation by blacks in the decision-making mechanisms of society was not possible, these laws guaranteed a negligible level of black involvement. In a system designed to racially categorize and divide all citizens and crush all dissent, it was inevitable that blacks became progressively more marginalized economically and politically, with negative consequences for conservation. Such an eventuality came about in several ways.

First, the government's "homelands" policy, which aimed at relocating Africans to ethnically divided rural areas, played a major role in perpetuating the spiritual and physical estrangement of blacks from the land. Despite the reality of urbanization, the government

embarked on a policy which confined Africans to small rural areas, where overpopulation, poverty, and a lack of basic services inevitably led to widespread deforestation and environmental degradation.[3] It was a policy that not only resulted in much suffering but also ensured that Africans were treated as foreign migrants in the land of their birth.

Second, apartheid institutionalized black poverty through a battery of laws and regulations, which placed enormous obstacles in the way of black socioeconomic advancement. The consequence of severe economic discrimination was that the majority of blacks were trapped in a cycle of misery and a continual battle to survive. Hence, few had the means, inclination, or leisure time to get involved in conservation activities.

Third, a racially differentiated and inferior educational system was implemented. It was specifically designed to train blacks for a subordinate role in society, and resulted in a worsening of the already very poor standard of education available to them. The retarding effect that inferior educational standards and facilities had on the development of black children also had negative consequences for the environmental sector. The widespread illiteracy and semi-literacy, which was its result, presented a major obstacle to the development of an environmentally aware, informed public, able and willing to participate in ecological appreciation or decision-making.

Fourth, a range of legislative restrictions on freedom of movement rendered blacks unable to explore and become familiar with the broader environment. Laws such as the Group Areas Act and the Separate Amenities Act had the same effect. The Group Areas Act No. 41, of 1950, provided for the establishment of separate residential areas to which members of the various population groups were restricted. The townships, to which Africans, Indians and Coloureds were confined, were bleak, hostile environments, often lacking in community facilities, cultural amenities, or green open space. Often devoid of any natural or scenic attractions (since environmentally desirable areas were usually reserved for whites) these monotonous, dormitory-like ambiences were also frequently situated in close proximity to noxious facilities such as sewage plants, polluting industries, and landfills.

The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act No. 49, of 1953, which enforced racial segregation of public amenities, resulted in a grossly unfair and unequal distribution of natural and recreation amenities. This also applied to the provision of accommodation at nature and game reserves, as well as national parks, which, for most of this period,

were almost exclusively reserved for whites. The use of racially discriminatory laws by national and regional conservation authorities made it difficult for blacks to gain access to nature and game reserves, hiking trails, picnic, and camping sites. The resulting exclusion of blacks from these amenities undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on the environmental attitudes of these communities, and should be considered a major factor contributing to black disinterest in, or hostility to, the whole concept of conservation.

During this period, the role of government as the ultimate protector of the country's natural resources remained a secondary one. Its primary role was always to protect its own political interests and that of its white constituency. Hence, the government seldom hesitated to adopt an anti-conservation stance if political expediency required it, as evident in the Kruger Park coal-mining debacle. In 1978, the Minister of Agriculture threatened to change the National Parks Act in order to allow coal mining in that area. Despite a public furor and the determined opposition of the Wildlife Society, the government seemed set to defy public opinion. In Parliament, opponents were denounced as lacking patriotism, and the minister went so far as to say that, "If we discover oil in the park, we would rather accommodate all the lions in the park in the Carlton Hotel." While the remark was facetious, of concern was the government's intolerance of public debate on the issue, and its readiness to sacrifice the integrity of the country's premier park on the altar of the national interest.

The government's cynical and manipulative approach to conservation was seen at its worst during the long period of ivory smuggling indulged in by high ranking members of the South African Defence Force during the 1970s–1980s.[4] While South Africa trumpeted its conservation successes abroad (such as rhino capture and relocation), under cover of the bush war being conducted in the neighboring countries of Angola, Namibia, and Mozambique.[5] Military officials were helping to decimate the wildlife in these countries in order to enrich themselves or in the name of "sport." National army vehicles were used to smuggle rhino horn and ivory in a network so vast and well organized that it is clear that the top hierarchy of government must either have been involved or, at the very least, known about and condoned it. At the time, however, and in the face of American allegations to the contrary, denials of official involvement or knowledge of the smuggling ring continued to be made.

The essentially self-serving nature of the government's relationship with conservation remained largely unchanged during this period, and it ended much as it began, with conservation matters occupying a position of low priority on the government's scale of importance. Of greater significance in terms of evaluating the government's role in conservation, however, was the cumulative effect of the battery of discriminatory laws enacted during the apartheid regime, which acted to deepen blacks' alienation from mainstream environmentalism, as well as the way in which government appropriated the responsibility for environmental decision-making to itself.

B. The Role of the Mainstream Environmental Movement

The mainstream environmental movement continued to grow during this period, both in terms of membership and in the number of organizations. While the trend may have shifted away from an exclusive focus on the conservation of fauna, flora, and natural resources and begun to include the problems of an industrial society, nevertheless its aims, approach, and ideology remained essentially unchanged. In addition, the membership of most major conservation organizations remained predominantly white.

To a great extent, apartheid measures restricting the freedom of movement of blacks, as well as a host of laws which sought to prescribe or prevent social interaction between blacks and whites, not only made it extremely difficult for ENGOs to recruit members of color, but also made it difficult for them to organize conferences, meetings, exhibitions, or any form of activity which included social interaction between blacks and whites. There is also little doubt that these laws were in some measure responsible for stunting the growth of the environmental movement as a whole, and of continuing to ensure that its narrow white support base was entrenched. These legislative constraints notwithstanding, mainstream environmental organizations must shoulder a large part of the responsibility for the racial polarization of environmentalism, for at no time was the membership of private voluntary organizations directly restricted by the government. Indeed, in many instances, it was ENGOs themselves that voluntarily implemented the government's racial policies, prompted by factors such as political conservatism, racism, and the desire to remain on good terms with the state and not jeopardize their financial support.

An example of this was the formation of the African National Soil Conservation Association (ANSCA) in 1953. ANSCA was established by the "whites only" National Veld Trust as a means of taking the soil conservation message to Africans without antagonizing either the government (on whom it was dependent for financial support), or its members, many of whom were white farmers with ultra-right-wing views.[6] Unlike the Trust, ANSCA had to operate in an extremely hostile political environment and its eventual demise in 1959 was in large measure due to its refusal to conform to the government's racial policies. Another example is that of the African Wildlife Society, an organization for Africans that was established by the Wildlife Society in 1963, despite the fact that no racial bar to membership existed. However, given the political conservatism of its membership, the reality was that a racially separate organization was preferred. Yet another example was the compliance of several ENGOs with government demands, in the mid-1960s, to purge blacks from their membership. While the demand lacked legislative sanction, the threat of losing government funding was sufficient to ensure compliance from some ENGOs.

Generally, however, most ENGOs did not directly exclude blacks from membership, preferring an indirect route. This was very simple to achieve, since the overwhelming majority of mainstream ENGOs were active only in white residential areas, thus resulting in the recruitment of an affluent, educated, upper to middle class (hence, white) membership. The dominant perception of the mainstream environmental movement was one of catering to whites only, a view fueled by the level of ENGO collusion with the state. This took the form of cooperative or joint projects with government and the South African Defence Force by ENGOs such as the Wildlife Society, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, and the Southern African Nature Foundation (now the World Wide Fund for Nature–South Africa). Other forms of collusion indulged in by most mainstream ENGOs (including the Wilderness Leadership School) included soliciting funds and securing the patronage of powerful government officials. During an era in which widespread suffering was wrought by harsh apartheid legislation, and when the might of the security forces was brought down on the internal anti-apartheid movement, the collaboration of the mainstream movement was viewed with suspicion as a part of the hated political establishment.

C. Outside the Mainstream: The Role of Community and Mass-Based Organizations

The cumulative effect of the cluster of discriminatory legislation enacted during this period compounded the distance between blacks and mainstream environmental groups. For most blacks, being mired in poverty and deprived of basic needs such as access to clean water, electricity, sanitation and refuse removal, meant that environmental issues were, perforce, of very low priority. For the politically aware, an interest in environmental issues was dismissed as an elitist pursuit, one of interest only to the privileged white minority. It is, therefore, little wonder that several of the black environmental organizations established during this period, such as the African National Soil Conservation Association, the Indian Soil Conservation Association, and the African Wildlife Society, were in fact established on the initiative of white "parent" organizations and whatever the intentions of the initiators, these organizations were, in effect, creatures of apartheid. This is not to dismiss the work of these organizations or to overlook the sterling efforts of the black conservationists (for example, Sam Motsuenyane) who were active in these organizations under very trying circumstances. Ultimately, however, it must be conceded that these organizations were unable to overcome the fact that they were manifestations of apartheid, and, further, that they were hamstrung by political and financial restrictions and were therefore unable to properly serve their membership.

These restrictions also applied to black-initiated organizations, such as the National Environmental Awareness Campaign (NEAC), established in 1976, and the Africa Tree Centre (ATC), established in 1980. The Soweto-based NEAC was founded by Japhtha Lekgetho in order to improve the quality of the environment as well as the quality of life of residents, through community-based projects such as river clean-ups, the establishment of parks, and anti-litter campaigns. The Edenvale-based ATC was established by the late Robert Mazibuko, a veteran conservationist, in order to promote tree planting, soil conservation, and organic gardening methods. Despite the valiant efforts of their founders, these organizations were constantly short of funds and resources, and hence were unable to make a strong impact and attract a broad membership. Moreover, these remained relatively isolated efforts, and it would not be before the mid-1980s, during a period of great political turbulence, when the first tentative steps were taken

toward legitimizing the environment as a political issue, and placing it onto the liberation movement's agenda.

The first extra-parliamentary political organization to commit to a formal environmental policy was the Call of Islam, an affiliate of the United Democratic Front (the South African front organization for the then-banned African National Congress). The Call of Islam had a formal environmental policy since its inception in 1984, due in large measure to the efforts of its founder, Moulana Faried Esack. The ANC itself was next to make a formal environmental commitment and, in 1986, the organization made a positive statement in support of environmental conservation in a post-apartheid South Africa by declaring that the conservation of natural resources would be an "overriding component" in future policymaking. In 1989, the ANC issued a detailed statement on its position regarding the environment, but cautioned that it was impossible to pursue a rational environmental policy within the confines of the apartheid system. It also pointed out that the homelands system contributed to the institutionalization of environmental destruction. Other extra-parliamentary groups that made a formal environmental commitment during this period were the New Unity Movement and the Workers Organization for Socialist Action, which both regarded environmental problems as political ones requiring political solutions.

Another noteworthy action by extra-parliamentary organizations was taken at the Conference for a Democratic Future, held in December 1989. At the conference, which was attended by all major anti-apartheid organizations, a resolution was proposed and unanimously accepted. The resolution recognized that, "all South Africans have a right to a clean, healthy environment and that the preservation and rehabilitation of the environment forms a part of the process of liberation."[7] The resolution also declared that the destruction of apartheid was a necessary precondition for the rehabilitation of the environment, and went further, calling on the "liberation movement" to support the protection and rehabilitation of the environment, foster an awareness of environmental issues and problems, and develop appropriate environmental policies for a post-apartheid South Africa. The acceptance of the resolution was noteworthy, demonstrating how the environment had become a relevant issue for extra-parliamentary groups within a short space of time. It also signaled the beginning of the erosion of the rigid boundaries that had artificially separated politics from the environment for so long.

While the steps taken by various elements of the liberation movement toward incorporating the environment into their political agenda may seem small and insignificant, in fact they represented a major and dramatic shift in attitude on the part of the political sector. To place this in proper perspective, it should be remembered that, firstly, the attitude that "the environment stands above politics" was a fairly pervasive one in South Africa; secondly, that the environment had been "sanitized" by successive government as well as conservation officials, and generally perceived as an ethically neutral, apolitical issue, not really worthy of the attention of human rights activists; and thirdly, that it was perceived by many blacks as an irrelevant, elitist concern, which had little or no meaning for the poor. Given this context, the growing acceptance of the environment as a legitimate political issue (even if just in theory) represented a momentous change in thinking. In addition, given the fact that the mid-1980s was a period of undeclared civil war, during which the internal anti-apartheid struggle reached new heights of violence, it is noteworthy that liberation organizations nevertheless devoted some of their limited time and resources to as unpopular an issue as the environment.

However, notwithstanding these changes, it would be a gross exaggeration to state that this paradigmatic shift in environmental thinking was widespread. Instead, it was an indication of the major transformation still to come. In practice, most black South Africans remained alienated from the mainstream environmental movement, whose emphasis on single species campaigns seemed to embody its indifference to the plight of the poor—as this comment by a black journalist clearly shows:

> If I never hear a word about the black rhino and its preservation again, it will be too soon. Here's the country in a mess and all that can be done is to collect *maphepha* [i.e. money] to preserve an animal that to me is as useless as the dinosaur…[8]

III. The Road to Democracy, February 1990–The Present

A. The Era of Transition, February 1990–April 1994

There are close similarities in the history of the environmental movement in the United States during the 1980s and the way the movement was to develop in South Africa during the 1990s. In both countries, a

history of racial discrimination, institutionalized black poverty, and political powerlessness are central to the environmental discourse. Given this historical legacy, together with the nature oriented and preservationist approach of the mainstream environmental movement, it was inevitable that, for much of the twentieth century, the major focus of blacks in both countries was political liberation, not environmental conservation. In the U.S., when environmental issues began to be couched in a civil rights context during the 1980s, and the right to a healthy environment started to become an integral part of a basic civil rights program, then minorities became actively involved in the environmental problems affecting their communities.[9] So, too, in South Africa. It was only when the political scene began to undergo radical changes and a major transformation began to take place within the environmental sphere, that black South Africans began to grapple with environmental issues in larger numbers than ever before. The catalyst for this was a dramatic announcement by the then – State President, F.W. de Klerk, on February 2, l990, which unbanned extra-parliamentary organizations such as the ANC and the South African Communist Party, and by so doing, ushered in an era of incredible socio-political change.

This act not only created the political space for liberation organizations to broaden their horizons beyond anti-apartheid politics and become legitimate players in South African politics, but also, as a result of the greater flexibility and more relaxed political climate, added impetus to the dissolution of the formerly strict boundaries between politics and conservation. For the first time since being banned during the 1960s, organizations within the liberation movement were able to gain direct access to their constituencies, and it became increasingly clear that a small, but growing section of that constituency wanted to ensure that environmental concerns formed an integral part of the political agenda. In response, first the larger mass organizations, then the smaller extra-parliamentary political groupings, began to formulate official policies on environmental issues.

The ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress were the first to release discussion documents on the environment. Both committed their organizations to a holistic environmental policy, incorporating the concept of sustainable development within a democratic political framework. Extra-parliamentary organizations gradually began to accept that environmental issues should form an integral part of their agenda, and also that the traditional notion that equated conservation exclusively

with the protection of wildlife and the preservation of the natural environment, should give way to a more holistic, socially responsive approach. Significantly also, their allies in the labor sector, viz., the trade unions and workers' associations, began to move into the environmental arena, which they formerly perceived as outside their traditional sphere of action. Trade unions began to accept that issues of industrial health and occupational safety were legitimate environmental questions and even central to their commitment to create work areas safe for both workers and the surrounding communities. Hence, trade unions, especially in the mining, fishing, and chemical industries, began to take a particular interest in the environment, and became actively involved in informing workers of their right to a safe and healthy working context.

Contributing to this resurgence was an increased level of action undertaken at a grassroots level. Impoverished communities in both rural and urban areas began engaging in campaigns such as protests against plans to site a nuclear power station in their area; demonstrations against the proposed construction of a toxic waste recycling plant; and the launching of an anti-pollution, environmental health campaign. Greening projects, which included the creation of community parks, the cultivation of indigenous plants for use as traditional medicine, and the establishment of food gardens, were undertaken by a wide range of community-based organizations, in both rural and urban areas. Such projects were practical expressions of the desire of the poor to take constructive action against the environmental poverty of their immediate surroundings, and to enhance the quality of their environment and their lives.

It is also worth noting that, during this transition period, impoverished communities served notice that they were no longer prepared to be the victims of the harsh conservation policies and poor environmental decision-making so typical of previous years. Thus, in 1989, stock farmers in the Richtersveld region of the Northern Cape refused to accept eviction from their traditional grazing land in order to make way for the creation of a new national park. Instead, the community applied for an interdict. As a result, the National Parks Board (NPB) was compelled to negotiate an agreement to accept the community as a management partner in 1991. A similar case involved the Riemvasmaak community in the Northern Cape, which had been forcibly removed under apartheid laws in 1974 and part of their land occupied by the South African Defence Force (SADF). In 1988, the SADF and the

NPB had signed an agreement allowing the latter to use some of the SADF land for the preservation of the black rhino, and to extend the Aughrabies Falls Nature Reserve. However, in 1992, representatives of the Riemvasmakers served notice that they intended applying for the return of their land and, as an indication of the extent of the political transformation, were supported in their land claim by the NPB in 1993.

Another interesting development during this period was the rise to prominence of progressive environmental organizations, which operated outside of the mainstream. One such organization was Earthlife Africa (ELA), established in 1988. It sought to emulate the international ENGO, Greenpeace, in its philosophy and objectives. Important characteristics of the "new wave" ENGOs, such as ELA, were their recognition of the centrality of politics to the environment; their willingness to challenge and exert pressure on the political and environmental establishment; and their use of broad-based coalitions, including trade unions and community associations. One particular case, which brought ELA international as well as national attention, concerned the dumping of toxic waste into the water supply of a poor rural community by multinational Thor Chemicals. As a result of an aggressive campaign waged by Earthlife Africa and their coalition partners on behalf of the community, executives from Thor faced charges of culpable homicide in the death of a former employee, allegedly from mercury poisoning. Although these charges were subsequently dropped, it was nevertheless due to the efforts of this new style of ENGO that a settlement was ultimately reached, which awarded the victims of mercury poisoning R9 million.

The involvement of poor communities in environmental matters, the highly politicized approach of the political and trade union sectors, and the activities of the more progressive ENGOs all combined to create a very different climate for the environmental movement. Stimulated and encouraged by the political changes in society as well as the dramatic shifts in approach within the environmental sector itself, the mainstream environmental movement also entered the process of transformation. Gradually, organizations such as the Botanical Society and the Wildlife Society began to demonstrate, through actions and projects, their acceptance of the need for a more broad-based appeal and socially responsive action. It was now increasingly acknowledged that in order to win broad-based acceptance, environmental issues had to take cognizance of the basic needs of human beings and the right to

a clean, safe, and healthy environment was a legitimate environmental goal.[10]

However, this does not mean that hostility to the conservation cause on the part of blacks had come to an end, as this bitter and dismissive comment shows:

> …the green movement agitates on behalf of flora, of fauna, of the entire animal kingdom, with but one exception: black mankind…we have better things to do than run along with the bandwagons of ignorant white people who need an interest to fill their time.[11]

Nor does it mean that there were no conflicts between the poor and the privileged over the issue of the protection of the natural environment and its resources. On the contrary, the era of transition was one of slow and painful progress, with numerous setbacks for the conservation cause, as poor communities, emboldened by political change, began to demand that past injustices be remedied. No longer prepared to be the silent victims of harsh conservation policies, long alienated from the resource base they needed for their survival, and frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of action in ensuring equitable access to natural resources, many communities began to take the law into their own hands. For example, in 1992, villagers outside the Mkambati nature reserve in the Eastern Cape kidnapped the managers and locked them up in chalets overnight as part of a protest action which demanded compensation for land lost during the reserve's expansion.

In the nature reserves of Dwesa and Cwebe in the Eastern Cape, where locals had fruitlessly been demanding access to resources traditionally utilized for generations, the land was invaded in 1992 and again in 1994, and plundered for seafood and timber. In the Western Cape, a "poaching war" broke out in the small-scale fishing village of Hawston. Here, in a coloured community that had fished sustainably for generations, conflict over the question of harvesting *perlemoen* (abalone) arose between conservation authorities and groups of people without permits to remove *perlemoen.* Hawston fishers had a long history of antagonism with authorities, dating from the apartheid era, when they had been forced to accept the harsh consequences of conservation policies imposed on them by outsiders. Despite coming to be labeled poachers, these groups defied the authorities and continued to harvest *perlemoen* because they believed that the resource was rightfully theirs.

This period witnessed numerous conflicts over access to land and natural resources, in which poor black communities were at a disadvantage, and which were testimony to the enduring impact of the apartheid era. Indeed, the era of transition proved difficult for the implementation of environmental justice. While the demand for social justice within the environmental sphere could not be rejected, its accommodation often occurred more at the level of theory and principle than of action. Nevertheless, the discourse of environmental justice had entered the mainstream.

IV. The Democratic Era, May 1994 to the Present

South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994 not only heralded the dawn of a new political era, but also brought about a political climate in which a broad-based and socially responsive environmentalism could flourish in more concrete ways. This trend was most noticeable in the unprecedented growth in action taken by ENGOs based in the townships and black rural areas. Community-initiated environmental action has flourished, and has included projects such as the establishment of a garden for indigenous medicinal plants by the Tsoga Environmental Centre in Langa, Cape Town; recycling projects and assistance to small-scale farmers by the Modulaqhowa Environmental Project in Botshabelo, in the Free State; an environmental education campaign by the Mafefe Environmental Protection Committee aimed at alerting villagers to the dangers of asbestos; monitoring the management of a hazardous waste site by the neighboring Vermaak community in Gauteng; and helping to save the Wolfgat Nature Reserve (which serves the environmental education needs of many black schools in Cape Town) from degenerating into a desolate wasteland.

Another characteristic of this period has been the greater prominence of environmental justice issues. For example, the Thor Chemicals case, which had been taken up by ELA in the early 1990s, was doggedly pursued, and when the culpable homicide charges failed and the company faced only a fine, civil proceedings were successfully brought against Thor in England in 1997. There have also been other moves for compensation by some of the many thousands of workers left badly injured or riddled with a fatal disease as a result of having been exposed to dangerous or unhealthy working conditions. While the issue of occupational health and safety has been highlighted by

some ENGOs, most of these cases have been spearheaded by legal rights NGOs. However, these cases represent only a tiny fraction of the workers and communities who were exposed to hazardous conditions by companies that were able to evade their responsibilities as employers due to conditions prevailing during the apartheid era.

Environmental justice issues have also been at the core of the work of many community-based organizations and ENGOs which serve the poor. Hence, many of their projects revolve mainly around basic needs ("brown" issues) rather than the "green" issues traditionally associated with the mainstream environmental movement. This has been particularly evident in the growth of the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF). EJNF, which is a national network of community-based organizations united around environmental justice and sustainable development, has grown to over 600 participating organizations since its formation in 1993. The EJNF has assisted many poor communities faced with a range of problems, such as the consequences of being sited in close proximity to a hazardous waste dump or working under unsafe conditions.

Consensus on the need for social and environmental justice has also been reached by governmental as well as nongovernmental conservation agencies. This may be seen in the more holistic approach of mainstream ENGOs and their willingness to reach out to the broad mass of South Africans and not just a tiny minority. The new approach and direction have also been evident in the work of national and provincial conservation authorities, of which the National Parks Board, the custodian of South Africa's national parks, is a prime example. The NPB, which was renamed South African National Parks (SANP) in 1996, has undergone radical changes in policy and direction since the appointment of its first gender and racially representative board in 1995. The SANP, formerly an unquestioning arm of the apartheid state, has slowly but purposefully begun to address the problem of the exclusion and alienation of black South Africans. An integral part of this process has been the attention given to resolving the problem of land dispossession, i.e., the forced removal of rural communities from their traditional land in order to create national parks. The SANP has had the difficult task of meeting the *just* expectations of dispossessed communities, while simultaneously ensuring the continued protection of its parks. This delicate balance of needs had to be met in the case of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park where a large group of indigenous people instituted a land claim for their lost ancestral lands; and also in

the case of the Kruger National Park, where the Makuleke people, who were evicted from their traditional land in 1969, have instituted a land claim under the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994.

In the case of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, the SANP and the indigenous San people have reached a settlement, according to which the latter will own and manage a section of the national park, which will effectively be a contractual park. It is hoped that these descendants of hunter-gatherers will finally have the opportunity to put into practice their considerable environmental and tracking skills as part of a proposed ecotourist venture. In the case of the Makuleke people, after months of intense negotiation, it was agreed that their land would be returned to them on condition that no mining, farming, or permanent residence takes place without the permission of the SANP. The land, which may not be sold without the permission of the SANP (which has the right of first refusal), is being established as a contractual park, to be managed on a co-management basis.

The issue of traditional use of natural resources in protected areas is also being addressed by national and provincial conservation authorities. In previous years, communities adjacent to nature reserves and national parks had been barred from access to areas traditionally utilized to gather resources such as timber, reeds, seafood, and medicinal plants, hence leading to conflict and the criminalization of a traditional activity. The punitive approach has now been abandoned by conservation authorities in favor of an alternative in which neighboring communities are regarded as "partners." The aim is to persuade and educate such communities about the benefits of protected natural areas, and to gain their cooperation in the sustainable utilization of natural resources. This approach has been adopted by all national and provincial conservation authorities, and communities are now being allowed access to national parks and nature reserves in order to harvest resources such as fish, shellfish, seagrass, and reeds, on a sustainable basis.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF), in complete contrast to its record in the past, has also emerged as a leading governmental proponent of environmental justice. DWAF's alien vegetation removal program, which in some ways echoes the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps. in the U.S. during the 1930s, incorporates an extensive job creation and training component for poor rural communities, and provides an outstanding environmental justice model. By 1998, the R250 million program had created 240 projects, which gener-

ated 40,623 jobs in largely rural areas. In turn, the "Working for Water" project (so-named because alien plants use more water) is underpinned by the department's National Water Policy, which aims to provide clean drinking water to all South Africans on an equitable and sustainable basis.

Despite the very real progress achieved in the implementation of environmental justice, the increased support given to ecological issues by people at a grassroots level, and the growth in organizations with a far broader agenda than the traditionally narrow focus of the past, it cannot yet be said that environmental issues enjoy mass support or that the concept of environmental justice is an integral part of South Africa's conservation ideology. Several indicators prove this. Firstly, it is important to note the lack of a national environmental movement that is fully representative of South Africa's population and capable of giving voice to the concerns and perceptions of poor black communities. Even EJNF, which is a coalition of diverse, locally-based organizations operating at a national level, is not itself a mass-based organization. Nor has any organization yet been able to inspire mass environmental action. The closest such example has been the protest against development in Oudekraal on the lower slopes of Table Mountain in Cape Town, where Muslim grave sites and shrines are situated. The possibility of development in 1996 gave rise to mass demonstrations in which thousands of mainly Muslims participated. However, while the huge swell of support revealed the extent of the potential community support which could be harnessed by the broader environmental movement, thus far this potential remains largely untapped and, to date, no other demonstration of mass support for a conservation issue has materialized.

The reality is that, while the South African environmental movement comprises a great number and diversity of organizations, few national organizations can claim to fairly represent the views and concerns of black communities, and fewer still to have significant black support. Notwithstanding the establishment of many new township-based ENGOs in recent years (EJNF's membership attests to this), there is a long way to go before it can be said that a strong indigenous environmental movement, reflecting the concerns of the majority of South Africans, has been established. Instead, the current situation is that a myriad of under-resourced, understaffed, and financially embattled ENGOs, with a predominantly black membership, are engaged in a continual struggle to survive. These small organizations, many with-

out a proper office or adequately paid staff, lurch from one cash crisis to the next. Lacking essential administrative, financial, and professional skills, these township-based ENGOs often collapse. Others become far too dependent on mainstream ENGOs, effectively functioning as the latter's "outreach" projects, and lose their autonomy completely.

Hence, despite the very real transformation in the environmental sector, the often unequal power relations between mainly white ENGOs and mainly black ENGOs persists. This has much to do with South Africa's conservation history, for on the whole, mainstream conservation did too little, too late. As a consequence, this country inherited a blighted environment and a population ill equipped to deal with it. Environmental illiteracy is widespread and there is a dearth of qualified and experienced black scientists and environmentalists. While this situation is undoubtedly improving, it would be true to say that the skills, expertise, and resources are still largely concentrated in the hands of mainstream ENGOs, whose staff and membership base are still mainly derived from the white sector of society.

Secondly, the generally polarized environmental perceptions of the privileged and the poor have remained largely unchanged, as evidenced by several environmental controversies. This fact became painfully obvious during two ecological disasters (viz., floods in the coloured and African areas of the Cape Flats, and an oil spill in Table Bay), which hit Cape Town in 1994. Commenting on the impact of these disasters on human beings and penguins respectively, a newspaper with a predominantly black readership editorialized:

> We've got a long, long way to go before we get our priorities straight in the new South Africa…the flood disaster this week was preceded by the ecological disaster that threatens our coastline and penguins. Then came the floods which left hundreds of human beings homeless and destitute.… What do the media and local government focus on? Penguins. Funds are set up, rescue missions get underway and even kitchens are set up for penguins. Yes, we are all concerned about the penguins—for their safety and security. We must do something to ensure their wellbeing. However, what is of equal or greater concern, is the human tragedy.[12]

This dichotomy in attitudes was also well illustrated during the controversy generated by the proposal to build a steel plant in Saldanha

Bay on the Western Cape coast in 1995. While mainstream ENGOs ranged themselves against the plant on the grounds that it would pose a threat to the adjoining West Coast National Park, there was almost unanimous support for the proposed development from spokespersons for black communities on the west coast, who dismissed the objections on the basis that "it was just a couple of privileged people making a noise." Many of the environmentalists were against the *siting* of the development, rather than against the development itself, but the level of anger and frustration displayed by poor communities exposed the unfortunate perception of conservationists as favoring environmental protection at the expense of the needs of the poor.

Black hostility to conservation issues because of the perceived priority given to the protection of wild animals and indigenous plants over the interests of people was also clearly demonstrated by a controversy involving the Makuleleke people who had lost land to the Kruger National Park. In 1995, the Makuleke people had been negotiating with a diamond mining company which planned to prospect on part of the disputed land, a move which brought them into opposition with mainstream environmental groups such as the Wildlife Society. The Makuleke were angered because, now that they were finally in a position to recover their land, its use was being dictated by outside interests. Speaking to a journalist on the issue, a Makuleke leader said:

> You should tell these people who like wildlife that they should come and speak to us before they make statements about how our land is used. And when they come, they should remember we suffered greatly when our villages were destroyed and our homes burnt down so that Kruger could be made bigger.... Now that we have a chance to get some wealth from that land, we are being told to put even more animals there. It will be very difficult to convince our people that wildlife is better than mining.[13]

The third indicator of the extent to which an interest in conservation remains linked to socioeconomic factors is the level of underdevelopment that still exists. In this regard, it should immediately be acknowledged that there has been fundamental political progress in South Africa since 1990, as well as significant improvement in the delivery of basic services such as housing, electricity, and clean running water since 1994. However, it is also true that an acute socioeconomic backlog still exists, which is manifested in widespread poverty and home-

lessness, together with high levels of illiteracy and unemployment.[14] The official 1996 census shows that the unequal pattern of life in the apartheid era is still very apparent. Whites are still the best paid, best educated, and occupy the best jobs and most environmentally desirable residential areas.[15] Among the rest, waste-picking, driven by desperation to scavenge rotten foodstuffs from dumpsites, remains a common survival strategy.

The close links between the existing levels of underdevelopment and the environment have been highlighted by the submissions to the Poverty, Inequality and Environment Hearings, conducted in May 1998. A government-appointed commission heard submissions from poor communities all over the country and it became painfully obvious that the litany of environmental problems which beset the poor remains long and mainly unresolved. There were appalling accounts of the misery that results from being forced to live without hope in conditions of environmental degradation worsened by poverty and unemployment. These accounts underlined the fact that the major causes of death in South Africa are related to environmental factors such as inadequate sanitation facilities, inefficient (or no) solid waste removal systems, lack of access to clean drinking water, and polluting industries sited in close proximity to areas housing the poor.[16]

Given this context, it is clear that South Africa's environmental problems are inextricably linked to a range of socioeconomic and political factors. It is also clear that radical development interventions and poverty alleviation programs are required in order to address this country's deep-rooted legacy of inequitable access to natural resources, and in order to gain the active involvement of its citizens in environmental decision-making. While this is the path to which a majority of South Africa's environmentalists and politicians are committed, the scale of the task and the extent to which this country, as a developing nation with limited financial resources, can realistically address the backlog of unfulfilled needs should be acknowledged.

V. Conclusion

Many traditionalists are more comfortable with the airbrushed version of South African conservation history, content that its more unpalatable aspects are forgotten in favor of heroic tales of game rangers battling poachers in the bush. But the story of President Kruger's rather limited role in the establishment of the park bearing his name is as

much a part of this history as the social dislocation and suffering caused to the many black communities who were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes in order to create these parks and reserves.

The story of conservation in South Africa in the twentieth century is inextricably linked to the socio-political history of this country, for it is this history which has shaped and directed the development of environmentalism. In turn, the history of the development of environmentalism has accurately reflected South Africa's painful journey through the eras of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid, and its transition to democracy. It is a journey that is far from complete, and it is one that will inexorably continue, as the environmental sector endeavors to respond to and serve the needs and aspirations of a multi-cultural population. As South Africans, we look forward to a future in which the needs of nature and the needs of human beings are no longer perceived as diametrically opposed. Perhaps then, the instinctive "poor versus privileged" divide seen during public reaction to a recent exposé of the abuse of young elephants, will be a thing of the past, and embittered comments such as the following, will no longer be made:

> Good to see such a big number of white people coming out, braving the winter chill to lend their humane support to the cause of animal rights.… The animal kingdom clearly surpasses Africans when it comes to 'rights' at least in this country.… Like these thousand or so committed animal rights activists who loftily flaunted their noble commitment to the cause on television last Sunday, I am also sickened by this outrage, if only because it reminds me of exactly what blackness used to mean in this society. In the nature of things, black people should have taken the lead on this account by dint of their fellow feeling respecting the mortifying experience of these defenceless, voiceless animals. After all, were we not treated like animals?[17]

Notes

1. David Anderson and Richard Grove (1987: 4–5).
2. *Veld Trust News*, 1944.
3. Timberlake 1986; Durning 1990.
4. Ellis 1994; Potgieter 1995.
5. i.e., a war of liberation waged between black freedom fighters and the white governments of South Africa.
6. Khan 1997.
7. Khan 1992.
8. Obed Musi, *Cape Times*, 14 November 1989.

9. Gottlieb 1993; Schwab 1994.

10. Cock and Koch 1991; Ramphele and McDowell 1991.

11. Dr. Gomolemo Mokae, Vice-President, Azanian Peoples Organisation, 1990.

12. Rafiq Rohan, ed., *South*, 1–5 July 1994.

13. Gilbert Nwaila, Makuleke leader, *Mail & Guardian*, 18–24 August 1995.

14. SAIRR 1997.

15. Statistics South Africa 1998.

16. *Environmental Justice Networker*, no. 17, 1998.

17. Dan Motaung, Letter to the Editor, *Mail & Guardian*, 1–22 July 1999.

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