

“Questioning Sustainable Utilisation”

By Gareth Patterson

In my most recent book, Dying to Be Free, I revealed what really lies behind the mask of South African conservation and its much-touted (and today increasingly questioned notion of "sustainable utilisation."

I detailed how this conservation culture is rooted in the apartheid past. In the South Africa of old, the former white government and its supporters were masters of exploitation of both man and animal and, like that government, the hierarchy of the "conservation government" of the day was headed by whites imbued with a utilitarian ideology with regard to wildlife.

And just as the supporters of that former government largely did not question the oppressive, exploitative political system (which, after all, worked to their advantage), so a sector of our society failed to question the exploitative systems of so-called "sustainable utilization" implemented to manage wildlife for profit (for mostly the white man).

It was, after all, that sector of society which was benefiting the most from the various forms of "sustainable utilization of wildlife." It was they who hunted for trophies and for biltong on the private game farms, owned overwhelmingly by other whites.

It was they who profited from the capture and trade in wildlife and from the high-paying international trophy-hunters coming to our land to kill for sport what should have been regarded as our children's heritage--our country's wildlife.

Wildlife was almost an exclusively white industry and today, more than five years after our first free, fair and democratic elections, utilitarian conservation still seems to be rooted in its outdated idealism.

Its proponents should heed:"That which does not adapt to change dies."

The hunting, use it or lose it, pro-trade conservation sector has brought shame to the new South Africa.

We were shamed as a country due to the canned lion scandal (which still continues) and shamed too by the conservationists' reaction--or rather, lack of moral action--during the Tuli elephant saga.

In the public domain, though, there is hope and change with regard to attitudes towards wildlife.

The public has demonstrated that they do care, and this has also been reflected in the media.

For example, Peter Borchert, editor-in-chief of Africa Environment and Wildlife magazine, wrote recently: "I am beginning to hate the term 'sustainable utilisation'...I am fed up with a term that is so often used to give a veneer of respectability to inexcusable exploitation and highly questionable morality...Wisdom and morality behind the economic use of nature, yes. Without them, a resounding no."

I believe that people in this country will increasingly embrace the essence of the following words written by philosophical scientist and carnivore expert George Schaller back in the early 1970s. He wrote: "We should not have to place a value on animals to whom values are unknown. We should

be able to guarantee their freedom solely for their own sake, but man's thinking has only just begun to approach such a level of morality!"

What everyone, the conservationists, the welfarists and the public at large, have to acknowledge is that the original environmentalists of this land (prior to the wildlife slaughter of the settlers) were the indigenous people.

African traditional religions are permeated by the knowledge of the spiritual dimension of all life. The rivers, rain, trees and animals were not viewed as mere resources to be utilised but viewed as having spiritual quality.

Africans were judged by the Westerners as "backward" because they wisely regarded the land as sacred. They were judged backwards for viewing nature as being invested with a mystic religious quality. And the historical Western attitude to nature? Usually one of exploitation for the supposed benefit of humankind.

Who, today, would we view as the backwards ones? Not those who regarded the land as sacred. Within Africa's original environmentalism, we today can find the seeds of spiritual renewal with regard to our relationship to the land and wildlife, and this could offer a message even beyond Africa.

It is interesting to observe that in the West, attitudes seem to be turning full circle. Western attitudes of domination over nature are subsiding, to that of care for nature. In the West today, animal welfarists are not viewed as radical (unlike the view of conservationists in this country), but are mainstream.

We are beginning to see a striking shift in environmental values (hence the huge membership and support of the international pro-animal organizations) and in spiritual values.

Increasingly, there is a yearning for meaning, and I predict that people in the West could find answers in the original beliefs of the indigenous peoples of the world--and, of course, where man was born, in Africa.

In the West there is a seeking after original truths which do not necessitate man's separation from nature. This realisation alleviates the loneliness of spirit felt so long by Westerners because of entrenched separatist doctrines.

Increasingly, people are coming to realize that our own existence is not unrelated to the animals, plants and trees. Within this realisation lies hope for nature and man.

Today, in South Africa, we should liberate ourselves from conservation doctrine imposed upon the land and people in the past and strike out afresh, imbued with the environmental values that cannot be bought or sold, the intrinsic value of the land and its wild inhabitants and for its spiritual value to ourselves.