

"From Conservation to Coexistence"

By Gareth Patterson

Conservation means different things to different people and therein lies many dangers. To some it means protection, that is to say preservation of wildlife and wilderness purely for its own intrinsic value. To others, such as South African conservationists, it means sustainable use, or "Wise Use" as they want to call it, of natural resources for the maximum benefit of humankind.

Some conservationists use the term in a way that is passive or benign.

I believe it is another word for management, for this day and age the prevailing philosophy is "it's got to pay to stay." Conservation in its many guises has also been a political tool in Southern Africa.

For example, from the 1920s onward, "conservation" in South Africa became a political, white, nationalist symbol. The Kruger National Park was named as such for politically loaded reasons. In the 1920s, Minister of Lands in South Africa, P.G.W Grobler, declared that "it is due to the farsightedness of the late president Kruger that we are today able to establish a park." In reality, that "farsightedness" of the late President Kruger, in fact, never existed. It has recently been revealed that "never in his (Kruger) life though of wildlife except as biltong (dried meat)..." And I wonder, I repeat what he (Kruger) could say could he see himself depicted as the "savior of the South African game!!!" so wrote Kruger National Park warden Stevenson Hamilton in a private letter in the 1920s.

Conservation in the Kruger National Park became different things to different people. Foreign tourists perceived the National Park as a showcase of Southern African wildlife. The middle class white South Africans saw it as a place of recreation, a romanticized reminder of "how things once were." And the black people? The views of the many who had been evicted from their ancestral land to live outside the park in "tribal reserves," and denied access to wildlife as a traditional component of subsistence? Theirs was a view that conservation and game reserves were white man's concepts and inventions, which put wildlife above black people and were instruments of dispossession and subjugation.

Of this, Jane Carruthers wrote in her book The Kruger National Park--A Social and Political History:

"The National Park ideology...reinvigorated the exclusion of Africans and consolidated the process of co-opting wildlife conservation into the orbit of white culture." and that, "within decades, the National Park was being overtly exploited to exemplify and inculcate South African culture, including casting Africans homogeneously in the role of poachers and whites in the role of conservationists."

To the Africans, conservation was viewed as a further tool of subjugation deriving from the whites separatist doctrines. Unlike the western beliefs of being the master of living things and of human supremacy over nature, traditional African pantheistic beliefs have no sharp distinctions between God and nature, no exact boundary between man's habitat and that of wild animals, and believed that God was present in everything--the animate and the inanimate.

Of this, the African sage Credo Mutwa wrote in his book Isilwane--The Animal:

"We were taught by ancient Africans that we are part of God (as a little pebble is part of a great mountain) and because of this, we should be aware of doing anything against the teaching and the nature of God. In old Africa we did not regard ourselves as superiors to the animals, the trees and the fishes and the birds. We regarded ourselves as part of all these living things."

Credo also wrote that:

"We believed that human beings could not exist without the animal, birds and fishes or greenery that whispers all around us...we believed that we had nature within and beyond ourselves."

The African worldview was a totally inclusive one, one of being part of the overall whole. Today, I believe we must look again and listen and hopefully learn from the enviro-religious experience of the traditional African people. Perhaps, in turn, western man can recapture some of the solidarity, the serenity and the healing which is so needed to nurture ourselves spiritually and to heal the injuries inflicted on nature in Africa.

Conservation needs to be transformed by the rediscovery of the African art of coexistence. To do this, we need to see wildlife, the wild places, other people and ourselves as being a part of nature. Feeling a part of all things natural is spiritually liberating. By doing so, one is freed from loneliness of spirit. Naturally, once you do, you are no longer alone. And by being part of the whole, of God, man's solidarity with nature and God is achieved. This is the foundation of the art of coexistence.