

African Potentials

Preface to the Volume 5

Who Owns African Nature? African Perspectives on the Future of Community-Based Conservation

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Africa's majestic, remote natural environment holds a fascination that is difficult to put into words. Delving into human history, we find that Africa was the birthplace of our species. For seven million years, this continent nurtured the seeds of humankind (Suwa 2006). At the same time, however, Africa's harsh environments, such as the Sahara Desert and Kilimanjaro highlands, continue to resist attempts at human settlement, and its tropical forests defied large-scale cultivation by humans until the introduction of metal tools and agricultural crops (Komatsu 2010). Africa's large wild animals, with the exception of the donkey, have also resisted domestication by humans due to their fiery temperaments (Diamond 2000).

In this way, the diverse landscape of the African continent, both the irreplaceable cradle of humankind and a place of untameable harshness, is today home to countless varieties of flora and fauna. At the same time, however, the survival of the ecosystem itself has become a matter of major concern, with 250 species of mammals classed as endangered in sub-Saharan Africa alone (IUCN 2013) owing to the deterioration and shrinkage of natural habitats, hunting, introduced species, and disease. The nature reserves that covered 11.0% of sub-Saharan Africa in 1990 have grown to cover 15.4% as of 2012 (IUCN and UNEP-WCMC 2014). Sub-Saharan Africa has eight of the thirty-four global biodiversity hotspots, chosen based on the uniqueness of the flora and rate of habitat destruction (CI 2014).

The deterioration of the natural environment in Africa is generally understood in terms of a simplistic dichotomy between nature and humans: a zero-sum game in which the increase in human activity, population growth, and resource exploitation lead to the loss of natural abundance. The confrontations that are happening in reality, however, are not those between humans and nature, animals, or spirits that have been the theme of so many animal stories. The real conflicts are those between local inhabitants and outsiders, between outsiders who stand on the side of nature and those who stand on the side of humans, and between various actors within local communities themselves. Nature preservation in Africa is not an issue that can be resolved simply by estimating animal population densities, nor can it be understood simply by studying the organization of power in local communities. This volume focuses on the set of issues brought about by this complicated situation, a field where the natural and social sciences intertwine.

The confused state of nature preservation that one sees on the ground in Africa today is made more complicated by various inconsistencies that are legacies of the bizarre history of the continent's preservation schemes. The establishment and management of nature reserves is now a vital tool of environmental governance, but the system of nature reserves itself has a complicated history. The birth and worldwide spread of nature reserves occurred within the context of historical change in Western intellectual representations of nature; the concept of the nature reserve carries connotations of a place to preserve "untouched nature," which is gradually being lost elsewhere. In other words, it is possible to imagine a definition of the nature reserve as a place free of human influence. In reality, however, nature reserves are very large social structures, "established" at great expense, with artificially "fixed" boundaries. The "design" of these reserves is discussed based on a conception of their "consumers" as rich tourists from abroad (Yamakoshi 2009). There is a kind of perversion inherent in the way that human influence at nature reserves is construed as nature itself.

The history of nature reserves in sub-Saharan Africa, their establishment and maintenance, has its beginnings in the colonial era of the early 20th century. Colonial governments, and new post-colonial governments that followed them, established nature reserves based on a top-down approach, with the aim of preserving those aspects of natural Africa most appealing to Europeans. This approach was founded on a view of nature and its preservation developed in the West, and premised on "a disregard for the natural resource management abilities of the African people" (Yasuda 2013). Faced with this heavy-handed use of power in the form of forced relocation out of reserves and hunting restrictions, local inhabitants expressed their opposition through resistance, open disobedience and clandestine defiance (Matsuda 2002). Nature preservation or preservation movements in sub-Saharan Africa were of exclusively external origin. In the first part of this volume, entitled *The Current State of Nature Preservation in Africa*, we address this complex history and current state of nature preservation in Africa with a focus on the status of wild animal habitations and the threats they face, ethical debates on sustainable usage, transformations in the concepts of "nature" and "wild," resource exploitation and tourism, and the effects of research and nature preservation activities themselves. We bring into relief the problem of how local inhabitants, who should be at the center of nature preservation, have been alienated in this process. We proceed to discuss the importance of actively incorporating the views of nature and techniques for its utilization fostered by local inhabitants—which at first glance appear mismatched with modern nature preservation systems—into preservation activities as African potentials.

The top-down nature preservation policies consistently promoted by Africa's colonial and post-colonial governments have been called "fortress conservation," effectively viewing local inhabitants as enemies and criminals. Such policies have become highly problematic, subject to the kind of retaliatory defiance typified by ivory poaching (Nishizaki 2009). In order to overcome this ossified antagonism, a "community-based" approach to conservation has been proposed and enacted, wherein local residents are not seen as enemies but rather encouraged to participate as collaborators in nature preservation, reflecting the paradigm shift in the concept of international development that evolved

during the 1990s. The style of nature preservation activities in Africa has been changing dramatically in recent years due to efforts to employ local inhabitants as staff and guides at nature reserves, include local representatives in decision-making processes at reserves, and return tourism income and other profits from reserves to the local community (Iwai 2009).

The character of nature preservation issues in Africa changed significantly with the rise of this “participatory conservation.” In fact, this approach has become so widespread that today it is difficult to find any conservation project that does not purport to involve the participation of local inhabitants. As yet, however, there has not been a correspondingly thorough scrutiny of the actual functioning of the plethora of “community participation” style projects that sprung up like bamboo shoots after rain as this approach spread. In fact, there is growing criticism of projects that are introduced in the conventional top-down manner and justified by a perfunctory façade of local participation, but that in reality leave no options for the local community. The “success” of projects can generally be judged based on either the distribution of economic benefits gained from it, or on the independence of the local communities involved. One may occasionally come across projects regarded as successful based on the former criterion, such as the Campfire project in Zimbabwe. The independence or initiative of local communities, however, is extremely difficult to judge, and at this stage it is unclear what exactly would constitute success under the latter criterion. In the second part of this volume, we present a detailed description of the state of “participatory conservation,” which greatly changed the landscape of nature preservation in Africa. While expressing hope in the future and the effectiveness of this conservation model, we proceed to dissect the various challenges faced today, and attempt to analyse the present situation, where the development of ideals has outpaced reality. Through these discussions we explore the possible function of African potentials.

The possibilities inherent in the sociological arena opened up by the idea of a community-based participatory approach allow for a range of future prospects for nature preservation in Africa. The participatory approach, with its emphasis on the return of profits to the community, has also allowed the introduction of an economics-based approach into a field that was previously the exclusive domain of environmental sociology and natural resource management. In fact, most good academic papers about community-based participatory conservation are written from the perspective of profit distribution. As an extension of the direction opened up by the participatory approach, one may observe a “neoliberal” movement to transfer control of natural preservation from nations to the private sector, based on the objective, quantitative analysis of profit distribution, and conservation efficiency in terms of market mechanics. This further complicates the state of nature preservation in Africa (Meguro 2014).

As economic globalization continues, Africa’s involvement in global networks is progressing rapidly. Local communities, the center of participatory approaches, cannot remain untouched by the effects of globalization, despite often being in remote locations. In particular, the rapid spread of communications technology and equipment such as the Internet and mobile phones has allowed local

users on the ground to access networks that connect them directly with global environmental discourse. It is sometimes possible to see fascinating cases of the deliberate “utilization” of these networks by local communities. In the third part of this volume, we examine new movements in African nature preservation, and explore the African potential inherent in the relationship between nature and humans in this new era, unimaginable in the 20th century.

This volume is founded on numerous discussions carried out by the African Nature Preservation Research Group, the original form of which began in 2008 led by Tetsu Sato, the third editor of the present volume, as preparation for an application to the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for a Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research on Innovative Areas. As we have emphasized in this preface, the most distinctive feature of research into nature preservation is its position as an interdisciplinary field, where natural scientists and social scientists cooperate, and sometimes disagree. As a result, there is often great diversity or inconsistency in the terms and concepts used. In the present volume, we have tried to respect the diverse academic backgrounds and experiences of each editor, and kept the standardization of terms to a minimum. For example, whereas use of the term “aboriginal” is not widespread on the African continent and there is a tendency to avoid its usage based on critiques of the concept of “aboriginality” itself, the term is a convenient one to use in the international context of political movements by aboriginal peoples, or to facilitate comparison with cases in North America and other places. In addition, use of the word *hogo* (“preservation”) in the Japanese title of this volume has been shunned by experts due to criticism of its condescending tone, and is now generally replaced by the more neutral term *hozen* (“conservation”). As outlined in this preface, however, there is a need for further rigorous questioning of the tone itself, and we deliberately use the word “preservation” as a critical tool in order to accurately present the historical processes whereby a “condescending” form of conservation was forced upon local communities.

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