

The Spectacular Growth of a Conservation NGO and the Paradoxes of Neoliberal Conservation

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Among the responses to Chapin's 'Challenge to Conservationists' in *World Watch* was a letter from Dr. Patrick Bergin, CEO of the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF). It stated that AWF would not be joining the debate surrounding Chapin's article, because it was more concerned with becoming a 'different kind of conservation organisation.' According to Bergin the AWF was a forward-looking organisation which meant that it should not be concerned with past mistakes and problems that might hinder its forward motion. He further described Africa's wildlife and wild lands as essential to building a sustainable future (Igoe and Croucher 2007).¹

This confident letter reflected an evolution of AWF's public image and self-imagination, consistently portrayed as an unmitigated success story. AWF more than doubled its operating budget between 1999 and 2006, from USD 8,274,170 to USD 20,022,394 (Sachedina 2008: 328). It thus became one of the most important conservation NGOs

operating in Africa, eclipsed only by the Wildlife Conservation Society, Conservation International, and WWF-International (Scholfield and Brockington 2008: 43). In 2006 AWF entered into a partnership with The Nature Conservancy (TNC, the world's largest conservation NGO), which coincided with a three-year (2005-2008) campaign to raise USD100 million dollars and double AWF's presence in Africa. The partnership was strengthened in 2008 by a USD10 million gift from philanthropists Dennis Keller (chair of AWF board of trustees) and his wife Connie Keller (chair of the TNC Illinois Chapter).²

This remarkable growth resulted from the AWF's ability to tap growing US government and corporate funding. In the late 1990s, AWF was the most privileged recipient of money from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) operating in Tanzania, receiving USD10.5 million in 1998 (Sachedina 2008: 326-330). AWF has also been relatively successful in securing partnerships with the corporate sector. The organisation entered into a major partnership with

Starbucks Coffee Company; received in kind support from Clear Channel Communications, Inc. in the form of airport advertising worth millions of dollars; and partnered with Disney to save wild dogs, as well as a smaller company called Endangered Species Chocolate.³ AWF's interventions in Eastern and Southern Africa have been featured as 'success stories' by the Green Living Project through a multimedia presentation that tours REI and LL Bean Stores throughout the United States.⁴ The organisation also features an AWF Visa Card that promises the protection of African wildlife and wild lands with every purchase, as well as web sites where supporters are invited to adopt virtual animals (with names and personalities) and virtual acres of landscapes.⁵

AWF's African Heartland Initiative has been central to its success in capturing these opportunities. This was a deliberate attempt to scale up the geographic reach of the organisation by expanding its sphere of operations on the ground. It was also an attempt to make the organisation's work more appealing to a larger audience.

¹For the full text of Bergin's letter please visit: <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/1832>, accessed 5 Jun 2009.

²<http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/illinois/press/press3483.html>, accessed 5 Jun 2009.

³<http://www.awf.org/content/solution/detail/3372/>, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

<http://www.awf.org/content/headline/detail/1255/>, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

<http://www.awf.org/content/headline/detail/1171/>, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

<http://www.chocolatebar.com/africa.asp>, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

⁴<http://www.greenlivingproject.com/events/>, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

⁵http://www.awf.org/section/engaging_you/getcc, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

http://www.awf.org/section/engaging_you/donate/donors/adoption_center, accessed 13 Jun 2009.

Sachedina (2008: 329) observes that this initiative was 'branded' with the advice of an American consultant. The 'Heartlands' brand was carefully chosen because of its association with the culturally significant 'heartlands' of the US, as well as for its 'inspirational value', which means, in part, its ability to attract funding. Heartlands envisage 'a conservation vision big enough for Africa.' They evoke the idea of a large continent, which demands a major initiative and a bigger AWF with a bigger presence in Africa, all of which requires more of funding.⁶ Accordingly, over the past ten years, AWF has opened new offices in Southern, Central and Eastern Africa, while plans for a 'West African Heartland' would extend the organisation's presence into a part of Africa which has generally received less attention from transnational conservation (cf. Scholfield and Brockington 2008).

The AWF's approach to growth fits well with anthropologist Anna Tsing's concept of 'spectacular accumulation.'⁷ This term normally applied to commercial companies' strategies for seeking start-up capital to pursue potential opportunities and/or resources. They typically face difficulties in that potential investors are most likely to invest in resources and opportunities that are already well in hand. To overcome this, firms increasingly resort to the use of digital film, GIS technology, satellite imagery, maps, and expert testimony to virtually call into existence the resources and opportunities that

they hope to procure once they have acquired the necessary capital. Because of the distance between investors and the resources/opportunities, the spectacular performances of these firms often become effective substitutes for actual opportunities/resources. By these means resourceful firms are able to accumulate capital with which to pursue opportunities/resources.

NGOs can use the same techniques to present potential supporters with compelling virtual opportunities (problems that need to be solved) and resources (e.g., science, experience, and authentic connections to communities). In doing so they enjoy a significant advantage over commercial firms. At some point the firm must deliver a profitable return to its investors. If the resources/opportunities fail to materialise it may wind up in trouble. When it comes to NGO returns, however, the stock in-trade are compelling success stories, and these can be produced by the same means as the spectacular performances that convinced people to support an intervention in the first place. Unlike tangible fiscal returns, such outcomes remain largely unverifiable to the average supporter of a particular intervention.

The AWF's work demonstrates clearly the techniques of spectacular accumulation. As Sachedina (2008, in press) has shown, AWF's Heartland campaign has relied heavily on maps and other representations of landscapes in anticipation of significantly influencing conservation in them.

Using these representations AWF has come to gain control of specific, and rather small portions of the landscapes in question. As relatively small as they are, however, the control of these landscapes has been essential to building NGO brands. It suits fundraising to be the only visible player in a particularly important conservation landscape, as donors often wish to support programs that are clearly the most established. Moreover, representations of these 'controlled' landscapes, are connected to claims about the possibility of influencing far larger landscapes.

These representations also conceal a number of disturbing trends that are consistent with the analysis presented by Chapin in his *World Watch* article (as outlined in the introduction of this special issue) and dismissed by Bergin in his response to that article. While these trends have not been readily visible to many conservation supporters, their details are well documented in studies that are available online (Igoe and Croucher 2007; Sachedina 2008).⁸ They include pressures to use money within a stipulated period of time (colloquially known as 'meeting the burn rate'), poor financial management and lack of internal accountability, conflicts of interests resulting from Tanzanian officials receiving various sorts of payments and benefits from AWF, ongoing conflicts with various groups at the community level, including the displacement of local people and their livelihoods by Tanzanian officials involved in AWF-sponsored interventions and a focus on

⁶view AWF's African Heartland video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1HmLRFwtj0&url=http%3A%2F%2Fvideo%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2Fvideosearch%3Fq%3Dafrican%2Bheartlands%26hl%3Den%26emb%3D0%26aq%3Df&feature=player_embedded, accessed 1 Jul 2009.

⁷Tsing, A. (2004) *Friction: an Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁸Igoe, J. and B. Croucher (2007) *Conservation, Commerce, and Communities*. www.conservationandsociety.org/cs-5-4-534.pdf, accessed 17 Jun 2009.

Sachedina, H. (2008) *Wildlife is Our Oil*, Doctoral Dissertation, Oxford University. african-environments.ouce.ox.ac.uk/pdf/sachedina_dphil.pdf, accessed 17 Jun 2009.



Jim Igoe compares notes with faculty and students from the College of African Wildlife Management at a Community Meeting in the Maasai Steppe Heartland

donors and fundraising which came to overshadow village-based fieldwork.

These developments are important in and of themselves, but are doubly concerning when one considers their connections to the logic of neoliberal conservation as outlined in the introduction to this issue. AWF's Heartland vision revolves around the idea that it is possible to use 'good science' and the profit motive to maximise 'both the economic and ecological function' of African landscapes. This in turn revolves around the intensive management of people and wildlife, as well as the education of people to take advantage

of new market opportunities by seeing themselves as 'asset owners' whose livelihoods depend on the protection of wildlife. This perspective fits well with the win-win scenarios that have become such an essential component of neoliberal conservation. In fact, from this perspective there are no losers. Wildlife, local people, NGOs, government agencies, western tourists, investors and for-profit companies all come out on top.

The successful growth strategy of AWF clearly demonstrates that such rosy scenarios are effective at mobilising people and money. Unfortunately, they also conceal conflicts,

connections, and paradoxes that are ubiquitous features of late capitalism and neoliberal conservation (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008 and Brockington 2009).⁹ Such scenarios can downplay the displacement of rural people by conservation and/or development. Or, where such displacements are acknowledged, the received wisdom is that they will be 'mitigated' by new kinds of market opportunities, as the economic potential of the environment is unlocked through conservation interventions.¹⁰ They also sidestep difficult questions about the efficacy of specific conservation strategies, a move that appears to contradict repeated calls by conservationists for a stronger evidence base to assess the effectiveness of their interventions. Sachedina's work further suggests that conservation would also benefit from a more vigorous examination of actual patterns of conservation NGO expenditure.

It will remain difficult to engage with these complex and thorny problems as long as win-win market solutions are consistently presented as a kind of common sense in mainstream biodiversity conservation. As measures expand to include payments for ecosystem services, certified hunting ventures, carbon offset schemes under REDD (Reduced Emissions from Degradation and Deforestation), the concealments are likely to grow. Under such circumstances it would behoove us to begin exploring alternatives to neoliberal approaches to conservation

⁹Igoe, J. and D. Brockington. 2007. Neoliberal Conservation: a Brief Introduction www.conservationandsociety.org/cs-5-4-432.pdf, accessed Jun 27 2009.

Brockington, D., R. Duffy, and J. Igoe. 2008. *Nature Unbound*. London: Earthscan.

Brockington, D. 2009. *Celebrity and the Environment. Fame, Wealth and Power in Conservation*. London, ZED.

¹⁰For a detailed discussion of these ideas please see the video coverage of the IIED sponsored workshop on conservation and food sovereignty, which took place at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, in October 2008, see <http://www.iied.org/natural-resources/key-issues/food-and-agriculture/conservation-and-food-sovereignty-workshop-video-barcelona-oct-08>, accessed Jun 27 2009.

and development, and finding more nuanced ways of presenting the socio-ecological problems that concern everyone in the global conservation community.

Taking these steps will involve difficult conversations, and reconsidering the assumptions that have been so effective at mobilising conservation resources in recent years. This does not mean a blanket rejection of market-driven conservation, but it will require more candid and inclusive evaluations of how

well they are actually working. From this perspective, works like Chapin's 'Challenge to Conservationists', though inconvenient, provide invaluable catalyst for the suspension of prevailing assumptions and beliefs. Though it may be profitable in the short-term to refuse to engage in reflexive thinking and dialogue, in the long-term such refusal stifles opportunities for learning, and therefore the possibility of finding more socially and ecologically effective conservation alternatives.

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Strategies for Effective and Just Conservation: The Global Environment Facility and India Eco-Development – Growing the Inefficient Economic Approach to Conservation

Zoe Young

The emergence of global conservation funds over the last 20 years has been driven by donor governments' priorities. These priorities include pacifying Western green and scientific lobbies, expanding economic growth through big business-as-usual, and the rebranding of old public institutions like the World Bank to chime with new agendas - particularly climate change and biodiversity conservation. Without an accompanying strategic framework to drive global trade and investment into more ecologically and socio-culturally sensitive developments, billions of dollars and any number of excellent projects - and quite a few less than excellent - have not created the substantive 'global environmental benefits' promised through innovations like the Global Environment Facility (GEF; Young 2002). While exploring the allocation of GEF's billion or so US dollars a year, often as a 'sweetener'

to 'green' development finance, I also found that research that did not treat marketisation of nature as given - but rather explored the roots, flaws and impacts of this 'new green order' - was not particularly welcome in donor and allied circles.

One of the first projects GEF funded in the Bank was a Programme for measuring the Incremental Costs of the Environment (PRINCE). PRINCE offered a framework for setting economic terms on global environmental value, to facilitate donor treasuries' restriction of GEF to protecting only 'globally' beneficial nature. This theoretical approach enables economic consultants to justify others' geo-political and business decisions on what to fund. It also set the stage for 'offsetting' the costs of protection against continued environmental destruction elsewhere.

Some of the more effective and credible critics of the GEF were offered medium sized projects of their own, as well as some small policy concessions, and thus transformed into an 'official opposition' that worked within the framework of the GEF. In this emerging 'win-win-win' scenario for bankers, donors, conservation big NGOs (BINGOs), project 'beneficiaries' and an 'evaluation community' (whose terms of reference leave out almost as much as they include), serious questions of cultural difference, human rights, or the effectiveness of conservation projects per se were effectively sidelined.

For if even one 'economic actor' rates a river, a lake, a tree, a flower, a frog, a fish, a view or a sacred grove as 'priceless', then all sums in an honest economic assessment would be reduced to zero. And by the same token, if any