

Avenues of Futility in Conservation

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Parable

Doctor Eco: 'So Mr. Earthy, How are we feeling today ?'

Mr. Earthy: 'Never felt better, doc.'

Doctor Eco: 'Strange, my tests show you are really quite ill. Your blood pressure and cholesterol levels are dangerously high, you are overweight and drink too much. You have hepatitis, malaria, TB and lung cancer and you insist on exposing yourself to unprotected sex.'

Mr. Earthy: 'What do you recommend doctor ?'

Doctor Eco: 'I suggest you give me the address of your club.'

Honest State of Biodiversity

The world is in a terrible state. The situation is worse than most ecologists' worst nightmares. The biosphere is literally collapsing ecologically and world leaders are completely unconcerned, unwilling to do anything to help (e.g. Kyoto Protocol) and totally engrossed in quite trivial games trying to make other people love them by threatening them with bombs and rockets (War on Terror).

Our forests are disappearing, the sea is polluted, the atmosphere is damaged, global fisheries are crashing, plant and animal species are going extinct all around us, we are running out of water, deserts are spreading and the climate is hotting up. Alien invasive weeds are spreading everywhere and GMOs will soon follow. Population increases almost tenfold each century.

Where are we going wrong ?

Conservationists have been totally ineffective. We have failed to prove our argument and cannot even show success when someone does give us some real money to play with. If we thought there was anyone out there who could do the job better, we ought to commit hari-kiri. At the very least, we should put on a public display of self-flagellation. We fail because we are so narrowly focussed on our own little projects or species interests that we fail to see the big picture. We completely underestimate the scale of the problems. We confidently ride on our horses, rattling our sabres and charge into battle against a column of tanks. We doggedly pursue a totally flawed logic and methodology. We fail to learn from our mistakes. We winge at how little money we are given and we fail to forge powerful alliances with any forces big enough to make any real difference. Below are some examples of false beliefs and common mistakes rife in conservation.

Conventional Wisdom	Real World Situation
Protected Areas need guards	Underpaid guards posted to a protected area will have a negative effect. They have no operational budget so can do little good

	<p>and to make a living are forced to generate money-making initiatives that exploit the protected area resources. They either extract timber, game etc. themselves or they invite their relatives and friends to do so (for a small fee).</p> <p>Many protected areas without any guards or staff survive surprisingly well as 'paper' reserves.</p> <p>Better to have 10 well paid guards than 100 useless ones.</p>
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<p>Management will improve if a project can pay the guards a more realistic salary</p>	<p>The worst thing you can do is pay the guards extra for the lifespan of a project and then dump them back to their former status at the end of the project. They become more negative than no guards at all.</p>
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<p>Every protected area should have a management plan.</p>	<p>Most management plans are not in fact followed. Excellent national protected area systems were set up and well run for many years such as Sri Lankan parks, Indian national parks and Tiger Sanctuaries, Malaysia's national parks without any official management plan.</p> <p>It is usually enough to have a general management policy. 'Here be the reserve. Herein no exploitative or damaging uses allowed.'</p> <p>The efforts of writing dozens of management plans are beyond the finance and expertise resources of most wildlife/ parks departments.</p> <p>The managers and staff of every PA should know what they are supposed to do and why. A management plan is only one way to achieve this.</p>
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<p>You should try to involve the local community as a participating stakeholder in planning protected area management.</p>	<p>This may be sometimes a necessity to reach some compromise deal but it is certainly not the best way to achieve conservation.</p> <p>The local community will always have</p>
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	<p>a more economical way of using the area than protecting it for biodiversity. Incorporating their wishes into management will definitely dilute the options available for conservation. Why not invite the urban poor to help run the national airport instead ?</p>
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<p>Reserves should be as big as possible.</p>	<p>An overstretched management will be outflanked and overwhelmed exactly like an overstretched army. An army needs to retreat to lines it can defend.</p> <p>In particular most protected areas should cut out lands already occupied by farmers, townships, industries or degraded beyond value. Efforts to hang on to such lands, even though legally gazetted as protected area, result in a complete drain of resources and energy in dealing with people problems.</p> <p>Reserves should be defensible and protection agencies must be realistic to abandon lost causes to regroup elsewhere.</p>
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<p>Ecotourism will save the day and put money into the local economy, winning community support and justifying protection status.</p>	<p>Ecotourism opens protected areas up to serious risks and damage. It becomes difficult to limit or control it if someone is making a nice profit.</p> <p>That someone is almost never the local community. The beneficiaries are usually distant investors in ecotourism facilities or travel and hotel networks even more distant from the site. Such agencies actively try to stifle any local competition and effectively drain benefits and resources from the region by exploiting the good tourism opportunities provided by the nice local environment.</p> <p>Ecotourism organised by local communities is great.</p>
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<p>If we can raise the standard of living of the local people they will no longer need to exploit the natural resources of the protected area.</p>	<p>Every step of the development ladder is accompanied by an overall increase in resource use levels. People never have 'enough'.</p>
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	<p>When a man graduates from a bicycle to a motor bike he suddenly also needs money to pay for the fuel. This need forces him to cut even more forest or sell more wildlife than when he was a subsistence farmer.</p> <p>If he can afford a gun and a chain-saw he becomes an even greater threat.</p> <p>Most ICD projects end up having a negative impact on the biodiversity they were supposed to save.</p>
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<p>The more money we can put into a protected area, the better the protection will be.</p>	<p>If the budget is tight, it is used carefully and for essentials. As soon as money becomes too available, all sorts of peripheral and irrelevant expenditures occur. As with buildings and fancy equipment below, these may prove a huge burden. Moreover, the sight of the 'have' PAs squandering funds is very demoralizing to the larger number of 'have not' PAs, struggling to make do on minimal funding.</p> <p>Funds for PA development should be efficiently managed and effectively used.</p>
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<p>The more people and agencies that participate in writing a plan, the better.</p>	<p>Imagine a house designed by several different architects.</p> <p>You are more likely to get a clear, straight forward, comprehensive plan with a higher chance of the activities leading to achievement of the identified objectives, if you leave the plan writing to a single expert. The plan may be better if he/she has consulted a wide range of legitimate stake-holders.</p>
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<p>GIS and other IT methods will solve management problems and lead to greater efficiency.</p>	<p>GIS is a very expensive way to create attractive wallpaper for the director's office. It is almost never used properly and rarely helps in planning or managing purposes. Radio telemetry provides less information than a man following an animal on foot. The most detailed satellite imagery is enormously costly and has a resolution of 4m. A man on the ground is very cheap and has a resolution of 4mm.</p>
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<p>A 5-year project with international consultants working side by side with national counterparts can transform a poorly managed PA into a model showpiece of conservation.</p>	<p>Hundreds of these projects have been undertaken throughout the developing world and usually fail for a variety of reasons. The main reason of failure is failing to identify the causes of poor management in the first instance.</p> <p>Funding agencies seem to be totally naïve about corruption, lack of national interest in the funding agency's own objectives, systematic draining of project resources into other programmes or uses, inability to maintain investment after the end of project. They have huge overconfidence in the likelihood that counterparts will become experts through osmosis. The designers and funders of such projects totally fail to grasp the scale of problems and pressures facing most PAs.</p>
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<p>If only we could explain to local people how important the Protected Area is, they would stop exploiting it.</p>	<p>What planet do these guys come from ? How many endeavours get carried through by altruism alone. Human nature is greed, selfishness, and lying, cheating or stealing to get what you want. The hungry poor have little social conscience and the fat cats have even less. When you find a rare altruist, recruit him/her fast into the protection department.</p>
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<p>Management will be more efficient if there are suitable perimeter or access roads to allow guards and managers to reach remote parts of a PA that could otherwise not be patrolled.</p>	<p>This is a recipe for disaster. Roads are the quickest way to guarantee huge exploitative extraction from the PA and opening of agriculture in areas that would otherwise not have been economical to farm. Roads help the exploiter far more than the protector.</p>
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<p>If we give the staff some training, the protected area will be better managed.</p>	<p>Short-term, one-off training courses have little impact. The wrong people attend. We expect people to learn 100% and use after a week's learning what the trainer took 10 years to learn. Staff are transferred or leave service; they cannot put what they learned into practice due to lack of resources. If they do not use what they learned they forget it very fast.</p> <p>Training should be regular throughout the</p>
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	career of PA staff.
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Common Mistakes	Comments and observations
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Protected area management agency spends most of its money on building a magnificent HQ/office and buying vehicles or other fancy equipment. Big display hides little action.	These baubles add little to management effectiveness but burden the protected area for evermore with huge maintenance costs.
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Biologists do a wonderful job of documenting plants and animals of a park but completely fail to grapple with the real selling points of conservation of the site.	The competition for resources that exists around most PAs is very much a real world problem. Biologists live by other values and are hopeless realists. "It's a fantastic site, it has 4 of the islands only 7 endemic spiders, you simply have to protect it." They also suffer from too much accuracy and honesty to succeed in the human jungle. We might do better to employ phoney ad-men to push our cause. "Look mate, if you borrowed a couple of million from the World Bank and sank it into this place, I reckon you could be looking at a 10,000% return on your investment within 10 years."
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Failure to address underlying causes of biodiversity loss	We try to deal with the symptoms:- illegal land clearance, over-harvesting, habitat destruction and ignore the underlying causes of the symptoms: demography, corruption, lack of transparency in resource allocations, poor governance, unfair international trade instruments, and suicidal religious attitudes on birth control.
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Failure of conservationists to learn the language and methods of finance such as environmental accounting etc.	This leads to a lack of appreciation of the real values of biodiversity and ecosystem service values. Until governments accept the value of these roles, they will not put in place the financial feed-backs necessary to ensure good protection of catchments, wetlands, coastline vegetation etc.
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Failure of investment in taxonomy	Unless countries can recognise their own species, conduct their own inventories and maintain their own biodiversity information systems, they will never be in a strong position to strike hard bargains vis-à-vis access to their own biodiversity and
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	genetic resources.
Failure to invest in required levels of training and manpower development	Following on from the general under-appreciation of biodiversity and ecosystem services is the lack of investment necessary to provide adequate environmental protection. Philippines has 30 forestry colleges churning out hundreds of new graduates armed with knowledge of logging, timber processing, grading, evaluating timber stocks, silviculture etc., Yet there is a ban on logging of natural forests and almost no forestry left in the country. There is no college or course training conservationists, although the country has 209 official protected areas. The picture is much the same in other countries.
Failure to utilise indigenous knowledge and interest in biodiversity into the conservation programme	Ethnic minorities and other long-term rural inhabitants lack high school certificates but they are great field workers and make excellent forest guards, research assistants etc. Departments should be more open to recruiting their knowledge and skills and less snobbish about race and education standard. Town boys with school certificates hate to be posted to remote forests and usually make lousy protection staff.
Over-confidence in logical frameworks for ensuring project success	Blueprint project designs by short-term consultants rarely take into account the real situation because a) the consultant does not know what he/she is dealing with and b) the level of complexity and unpredictability is far beyond the original scope of 'logical framework' approach, which was designed for engineering.
International agency pressures on countries to prepare too many plans and make too many reports	Most countries now have several overlapping conservation plans, studies, strategies, state of environment reports, action plans, plans for sustainable development, strategic environmental analyses etc. In addition agencies have loaded many types of overlapping international reporting conditions – CBD, Ramsar, CITES, Asian Wetlands Inventory and many more. The lack of

	harmonisation in approach has led to waste of time, waste of money, competition between agencies, tying up of key staff on unnecessary tasks, sapping of national morale and often poor planning.
Short lifespan of conventional projects	Funding cycles of agencies and governments generate projects of only 3-5 years duration. This is generally quite inadequate to achieve sustainability. Both national and international interjections should be much longer commitments.
Over-investment in the development of biodiversity databases and lack of investment in the data collection process	The developing world is full of marvellous database full of rubbish data. The important thing which is consistently missed is to create data reporting flow from the ground to the database.

How do we change course?

- Stop imagining the world is how we would like it to be and start seeing how it really is
- Forget all our preconceptions
- Get more devious, wily and secretive in the way we move towards our goals
- Learn economics so we can do battle with bigger numbers
- Force politicians to recognise the serious state of global biodiversity and the economic consequences of failing to act
- Recognise that there are real enemies out there and identify and counter the individuals, corporations, systems and policies that are taking the planet down the slope
- Forge strong alliances to combat those enemies (especially mass media and public opinion), pit our enemies against each other
- Stop diluting conservation objectives with secondary agenda of poverty and gender (there are enough other people fighting those wars).
- Learn by our mistakes and get ever more cunning
- Arm the public and NGOs with data to lobby against destructive programmes and policies
- Dismantle the stranglehold of powerful multinationals and unfair trade agreements that force developing countries to follow unsustainable development paths
- Combat corruption and urge aid programmes and international banks to avoid fuelling corruption