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Community Conservation and Commerce

Creating appropriate decision making structures for local people to ensure that they can make informed decisions about their futures is at the heart of sustainable development. It is so basic and fundamental, it is too often ignored.

A new series of films on the Ju/'hoansi people of Namibia, Africa has been recently released by filmmaker and anthropologist John Marshall who has shared and documented their lives since he was sixteen years old. *"**A Kalahari Family** is a five-part, six-hour series documenting 50 years in the lives of the Ju/'hoansi of southern Africa, from 1951 to 2000. The series challenges stereotypes of "Primitive Bushmen" with images of the development projects Ju/'hoansi are carrying out themselves."* [1]

The final part of the series titled, *Death by Myth* is a story of the Ju/'hoansi and their interaction with international aid donors seeking to establish a reserve and ecotourism enterprise. *"Namibian independence attracts vast amounts of international aid, but development programs no longer benefit Ju/'hoansi farms. We witness the power of the Bushman myth that Ju/'hoansi live uniquely in harmony with nature and are born to hunt. Ju/'hoansi ask, "Where is all the money going?"* [2]

Death by Myth is a shocking indictment of international development workers who seek to develop a nature reserve on Ju/'hoansi land without truly listening to the needs and wants of the Ju/'hoansi. What transpires is very important, as the project called LIFE was dedicated to bringing a better economic environment to local people through ecotourism and safari hunting. After the five year project is over, and dozens of consultants have come and gone, John Marshall returns to find empty buildings and the Ju/'hoansi worse off than before the project arrived. According to the film, there appeared to be little or no results from the efforts to establish ecotourism. At the same time, the Ju/'hoansi who sought to be farmers received little support from the LIFE project and many of their small farms failed.

This documentary is wrenching to watch and full of depth for those involved with the development of community based ecotourism. The conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity was clearly the goal

of the LIFE project, while helping the Jo/'hoansi to live a life of their choosing on their historical lands was largely ignored. *Death by Myth* fully demonstrates that the Ju/'hoansi no longer cared to be hunter gatherers, yet development workers believed that they should live as they did in the 1950s, in order to make their culture more in tune with the conservation mission of their project.

Death by Myth proves there is a great deal to be accomplished to ensure powerful, funded institutions do not presume what is best for local people. But how to rectify the problem is a very important question, as important as the problem itself.

Pre-emptive Conservation

At present, the international NGO conservation community is taking increasingly pre-emptive approaches to the conservation of natural resources.

There is a strong sense among leading thinkers of biodiversity, such as the renowned Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, that entire biological systems must be saved in order to conserve the process of evolution itself. In order to achieve this goal, organizations such as Conservation International have chosen to use the vast capital resources of northern economies to buy or lease southern ecosystems. According to a recent Scientific American article,

> *"This implies purchasing tracts large enough to accommodate entire ecosystems. It would also mean prohibiting all human uses of the land. It may not be impossible. Utterly undeveloped wilderness is relatively cheap."*
>
> *"It turns out to be a lot easier to persuade a corporate CEO or a billionaire of the importance of this, than to convince the American public," says E.O. Wilson.* [3]

While vast new sums of foreign capital are already flowing into regions where undeveloped wilderness exists, are comparable resources available to support the local management and decision making processes it will take to conserve these places over time? Would local governments, traditional peoples, and local communities agree to these land leases and purchases, if they had equal access to capital? Or is the North, through well funded NGOs, simply buying its solutions, where consensus cannot be reached?

Sustainable Patterns of Economic Development

In her introduction to the excellent book, on *Sustainable Community Development, Marie Hoff asks, "What are the role, effectiveness, and democratic representativeness of foreign NGOs leading sustainability initiatives and making resource decisions?"* [4]

According to Gail Lash, PhD, the author of the Rural Ecotourism Assessment Programme (REAP) publication recently released by EplerWood International[5], there were many questions raised at the 2003 World Parks Congress in Durban and an uprising of concern about the trend to purchase large tracts of land without local participation or involvement. Lash reported to me, "There was acknowledgement among the IUCN leadership of the congress that stakeholder concerns need to be addressed."

But are NGOs together with their donors entering into a "devil's bargain" by trying to take charge of the fate of the world's ecosystems? Can stakeholder involvement be legitimate if land conservation decisions are made and funded before the process begins? Or, as seen in *Death by Myth* are local people simply being "trained" to participate in this process?"

Non Rhetorical Engagement

Marie Hoff states, *"Social development practitioners have gained awareness in the past several decades that economic development is more likely to succeed if explicit attention is paid to the human factor. Likewise, if local environments are to be protected and respected for the long-term future, the needs of people must be considered deliberatively."* [6]

Most individuals would agree with this worldwide. But two camps seem to be developing. Those who insist their voices are not being heard in the global decision making process, as articulated in the new *"Rights and Responsibilities"* document being published by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)[7]. And those who say they are open to stakeholder involvement as part of all their decision making processes -- the large majority of NGOs and global donor bodies worldwide. There is a feeling of increasing, unexpressed frustration on both sides. Clearly the donors and NGOs have the power. They can get investments from billionaire donors, the World Bank and the global bilateral aid community. Meanwhile the angry representatives of the disenfranchised increasingly disengage and make grandiloquent statements. The solutions are not likely to be found in statements from either side. It is much more likely to be found through "non-rhetorical engagement."

In the publication REAP, authors Lash and Austin seek to find the frontier of non-rhetorical engagement. And they seek to find it within the communities affected by both NGO and private business investment. During their work in Belize, Lash and Austin sought to understand exactly what processes and decision making approaches could improve community ability to directly input into the decision making of donors, the private sector, and their own governments. While REAP was just one small effort to try and find how three small communities would like to direct their own future, it was also an effort to fashion a new kind of community assessment tool to keep communities in the loop and more in control of their futures.

Community Decision Making and Ecotourism Development in Belize

Lash and Austin spent 3 months in Belize in 2000 to review the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats faced by residents of three Belizian coastal communities, Placencia, Seine Bight, and Hopkins. This area has seen rapidly growing tourism, and Placencia, a creole community is the most heavily visited, while Seine Bight and Hopkins, which are more traditional Garifuna communities, have many fewer visitors, largely due to their locations.

Foreign capital has been flowing in to buy land and build resorts between Placencia and Seine Bight, and NGO funds have been abundant to secure the marine biodiversity of the barrier reef just off the Placencia coast. But no donor funds were available, during the period of Lash and Austin's research, to support cultural conservation, community infrastructure, or the capacity of communities to engage governmental decision making processes, except in the context of conserving the marine resources.

The question REAP researchers asked is how to ensure appropriate decision making structures are in place for local people, before unleashing the free flow of foreign capital. They found that villagers wanted to maintain local control, while also sharing their culture and developing nature trails and a local park. But at the same time, they found villagers felt like "foreigners are there to rape the area, reap benefits for personal gain, and then sell off their businesses to new outside buyers."

The frightening nature of seeing foreign institutions come in to develop, or conserve for that matter, is articulated throughout the REAP document. The issue is that their own villages are not within their control. The villagers of Placencia told Lash and Austin, "the controlling and regulation of tourism development is out of our hands. The government does not listen to local business, there is an absence of building codes, zoning and land use planning."

The case studies show that there is a clear and vast inequity of power and ability to act on local matters 1) due to unequal access to outside capital, and 2) an unresponsive governmental system. While, well funded developers arrived to build a resort called “The Plantation” with as many as 5000 lots planned for sale to foreigners, local people in nearby Placencia with a population of 1500 were unable to raise any support or capital for their own needs.

Lash and Austin documented village needs in full. And they are basic human needs. For Seine Bight, the least developed village, residents sought a library, post office, sewage treatment, a park for local people, and a sea wall. For Hopkins, community members sought to develop a tourism master plan, to revive their fishing cooperative, and build a cultural center. For Placencia, the most heavily touristed, residents sought to widen and pave their roads.

In the end, Lash and Austin found that the communities wanted to remain small while remaining in charge of their destiny and improving the local quality of life. They are “concerned about the rapid pace of development and resent the foreign businesses that are bringing this change.”

Lash and Austin concluded that cultural bridges need to be built between the foreign businesses and local people to bring about orderly beneficial development for all. Certainly the first step is “non-rhetorical engagement” in building solutions. Alison Austin comments, “Connecting with communities and then collaborating is fundamental for success in community-based tourism.”

Basic decision making structures for local communities are only forming in Belize, and the process of sustainable development is truly hampered by a system where local people have weak decision making bodies at the community level and a governmental system that is not designed to respond to their needs.

For those who work in international development, this is a familiar case and scenario. The brilliant book, *The Mystery of Capital*, documents that the working poor in developing countries do not have access to capital because systems for managing and controlling their property rights are not accessible to them through the legal system of their country. Author Hernando de Soto states that international market development has failed to take into account the needs of developing country populations to be properly integrated into the legal and governmental systems of their country, without which they have no means to participate in the market system, no access to capital.

> *There is a growing sense, even among some elites, that if they have to depend solely and forever on the kindness of outside capital, they will never be productive players. They are increasingly frustrated at not being masters of their own fate.* [8]

For projects where bilateral or multilateral donors are involved, REAP proposes to put community needs and concerns into the design of the project, and not after all of the terms of references have been written. It is suggesting, strongly, that community issues and problems are researched and understood, BEFORE an NGO or donor project begins.

With communities around the world threatened by so much change, and without governmental systems to handle this change, resentment is building. If development projects are designed without helping local institutions to improve, they will remain unresponsive to the underlying causes for environmental destruction. Yet, this is precisely what is happening, in Belize and elsewhere throughout the world. In Placencia another island was recently purchased by CI to protect whale sharks, and more large foreign owned businesses are being permitted. But there is still no evidence of support for the development of the decision making capacity of local residents and their ability to manage this change and bring basic human services to their doors.

Communities and the Green Market

Just as governmental decision making and human concerns have been recently shaded out of the conservation process, working within the consumer market has been increasingly sidelined as a viable tool for sustainable development. The market has not entirely cooperated and has become a frustrating problem for those who want to create a green market within the image of their proposals and mission statements.

In Scientific American, two knowledgeable NGO consultants write that the green marketplace for ecologically sustainable products is slow and not as effective a conservation tool as originally hoped.

> *"Unreliable profits face the producers of coffee and cocoa. Whether or not they produce green goods, all the producers of these products face the uncoordinated nature of global production which often results in vast oversupply. For green consumerism to work in this context, conservationists must find ways to not only make cultivation and harvesting ecologically sound, but also to ensure that the products will be profitable in a competitive market."* [9]

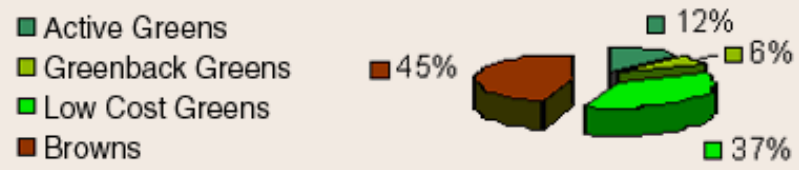
The management of green commerce has proven to be unwieldy for the NGO community. They want the green market to respond to projects of their design, and they do a good job of convincing donors that the market is there. In the case of ecotourism, many enterprises, including some with major foundation and donor investment failed because the green market did not respond as expected. [10] Current research shows that the American market for green goods was actually declining in the 1990s.

Large psychographic studies on the environmental purchasing habits of Americans, by the Roper Organization[11] , in 1990 and 1997, show that some 11% - 12% of the American public are Active Greens. They avoid buying products from companies they perceive as not environmentally responsible, and support environmental groups and organizations. This is about 36 million Americans, a substantial group, and it did not vary much in size between survey periods. However, this research shows that on average this group is willing to pay little more for environmentally sound products, on average a tiny 7% premium.

There is a group of Americans that is willing to pay more for environmental products according to Roper research. These **Greenback Greens**, tend to be less actively involved in environmental causes and have less interest in making any adjustments in their lifestyle, but they are willing to pay 20% more for environmentally sound products. Interestingly between 1990 and 1997, this group shrank dramatically from 11% of the population in 1990 to only 6% in 1997, or 18 million Americans.

Many Americans seem to have decided they want environmental performance at minimal personal effort and at low cost. This **Low Cost Greens** group grew substantially in the 1990s to 37% of the U.S. population or 111 million Americans.

The remaining group, the **Browns**, have little or no interest in environmental issues or purchases. This group grew in the 1990s representing 45% of the U.S. population by 1997, or 135 million Americans.



Labels are changed/adapted from Roper for this report

The general market for green products did not expand in the 1990s, despite the dramatic growth of the U.S. economy. The 12% committed environmentalist base remained firm, but the vast majority of Americans decided in the 1990s that environmental products were not worth extra cost or effort.

The green market is smaller than expected, and the ecotourism market smaller still. In the case of the U.S. market, it may be about 4.5% of foreign travel according to the WTO market study[12]. The market for community based projects is even more difficult to gauge. In fact, until recently no study had ever been done on the market for community based ecotourism. (EplerWood International together with partner Green Consulting in Ecuador has just completed such a study in Ecuador, results to be released next year). In the face of a marketplace that is clearly more complex and difficult to navigate than originally thought, NGOs have sought to ensure there is a market for their products through the funding of certification projects. This will be investigated in the next Epler Wood Report.

Empowerment in the Long Term

The trend toward wholesale purchasing of environments for conservation is a reversion to the old colonial tradition of taking control over the assets of the developing world. In a global diplomatic climate where Washington's pre-emptive strikes are putting the entire world on edge and undermining the venerable traditions of diplomacy and engagement, we see that conservationists are taking their own pre-emptive strikes. They are losing patience with human dialogue, partnerships, diplomacy and the work of making local institutions respond to local needs. They are choosing to design a world where rich billionaire donors pay the bills.

Working with local decision making bodies and the finicky market for green goods may be a difficult path. But ignoring governments and real world markets will result in the disempowerment of local

people. It will have a long and terrible impact. It will result in the inability of local people to develop their own responsive institutions and businesses. Local people in developing countries will resign from the process of taking full responsibility for their own environment and creating responsive businesses for the sale of their own goods. If governmental institutions are simply ignored, if the market as it presently exists is not engaged – NGO investment in conservation of natural resources will be perceived by local people to as just another tool to take control. The long term efforts to achieve conservation worldwide will never win the hearts and minds of those who must ultimately care for the earth, local people.

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