

INTRODUCTION



On the second floor of New York's Museum of Modern Art hangs a large canvas entitled *The Dream*, by the French painter Henri Rousseau. *The Dream* depicts a fantastic moonlit jungle in shades of green, with brilliant splashes of blue, yellow, and orange. On the left, tucked neatly among ferns and orchids, a naked woman reclines on a Louis-Philippe couch, her outstretched arm reaching toward a dark-skinned man, clad in a brightly striped loincloth, playing a flute. Even more arresting than this remarkable pair, however, are two eyes, wide black circles rimmed with yellow, that peer out from the bush and bring the viewer up short: a lion crouches in the grass. Closer inspection reveals a lioness as well, and then a serpent, two birds, a monkey, and, finally, deep in the jungle, the eye and huge ear of an elephant.

What is one to make of this? The woman lounging in the jungle—Rousseau called her Yadwhigha—is not in the jungle at all, he once explained, but at home, dreaming of wild places, perhaps of paradise. *The Dream* portrays an ideal wilderness beyond the reach of Europe, and in so doing it captures a

vision of Africa that has persisted for over five centuries.

Rousseau had similar dreams. He was called the *Douanier*, or customs inspector, a title that implies a knowledge of the world beyond Paris. Rousseau, however, was not a *douanier* at all but rather a *gabelou*, an employee of the municipal toll service. He never set foot outside of France. He found his jungles at the Jardin des Plantes, his wild animals in the pages of the encyclopedia and in his imagination. In this Rousseau resembled most of his generation, which came of age in the last half of the nineteenth century. Although few Europeans of that era had firsthand knowledge of Africa, many conjured up visions of exotic jungles filled with animals. Rousseau gave the visions form and color.

Images of Africa among Rousseau's contemporaries grew from stories told by explorers and travelers like Mungo Park, Richard Burton, and David Livingstone. From these and others came tales of the Dark Continent, the world's last great wilderness. The heroic figures from the golden age of African exploration searched for the sublime and found it; here was a refuge from industrial, despoiled Europe. To an eager audience steeped in romanticism, and to the generations that followed, the tales of the explorers created an Africa that was both paradise and wilderness, a place of spectacular but savage beauty.

Europeans invented a mythical Africa, which soon claimed a place of privilege in the Western imagination. We cling to our faith in Africa as a glorious Eden for wildlife. The sights and sounds we instinctively associate with wild Africa—lions, zebra, giraffe, rhinos, and especially elephants—fit into the dream of a refuge from the technological age. We are unwilling to let that dream slip away, and perhaps appropriately so. The march of civilization has tamed or destroyed the wilderness of North America and Europe, but the emotional need for wild places, for vast open spaces like the East Africa's Serengeti Plain, persists.

European explorers wanted to believe in a virgin land, un-

sullied by human hands. Yet, this Africa never was. Indeed, nowhere does the vision of Africa depart further from reality. Man has been an integral part of the African landscape for over 2 million years. That people lived in Africa, however, was irrelevant to the West; what mattered was the wilderness. Wild Africa was considered so important, in fact, that people in Europe and North America organized a movement to save it.

Once Africa's wilderness began to shrink, countless individuals, whose motivations ranged from true altruism to rather obvious greed, sought to exploit the frightening notion that the continent's animals were about to vanish. Nothing plucks the heartstrings better than a lion cub or a baby elephant. Thus, over the last one hundred years, we have found ourselves deluged with books, lectures, and now television shows and movies about Africa, some explicitly trying to raise money, others designed to win converts to a cause. More people have probably got their first taste of Africa from public television—with "Nature," "Nova," and specials produced by the National Geographic Society—than from any other source. "Nature" alone has several million viewers every Saturday night. Although well made and reasonably accurate, such programs have a serious flaw: they return over and over again to the same images of East Africa, primarily Kenya and Tanzania. It is thus hardly surprising that in the popular mind, Africa consists entirely of wide grassy plains and wild animals.

The myth of wild Africa has changed since Rousseau's time. Ask someone to paint a picture of Africa today and it would resemble not Rousseau's dreamy jungle but rather the Serengeti of "Nature": thousands of wildebeest marching nose-to-tail in a line a mile long, while several well-fed lions laze under a flat-topped acacia tree nearby. In the background, the modern Rousseau would paint vultures picking at what little remains of last night's kill, while hyenas slink off to their dens with the bones.

The Dream, completed in 1910, seems to portray a tropical Anyplace, as the fluteplayer resembles the Tahitians favored

by Rousseau's contemporary, Paul Gauguin. The more recent vision of Africa, on the other hand, springs from a real place, inhabited by real people. The Maasai who live here call it *sirinet*—the endless plain.

The Serengeti has such great emotional appeal that for many people it has become Africa, a feat of mental gymnastics that collapses a fantastically diverse continent onto the head of a pin. A typical question put to a traveler returning from safari is, "What language do they speak in Africa?"—implying that the continent is one country and one people, rather than a jumble of some eight hundred ethnic groups and over one thousand languages and dialects.

Africa is the poorest region on earth, and it attracts thousands of well-intentioned Western governments, international banks, conservation organizations, and other institutions and individuals seeking to fill the continent's urgent needs. Many of these would-be benefactors arrive with the simplistic image of Africa as baggage, and that image sets the ground rules for their actions regarding both wildlife conservation and human development.

Wildlife conservation has become one of the most visible and contentious areas of contact between Africa and the West. The effort to save Africa's natural heritage has, justifiably, been seen as an unquestioned good, practically a moral duty for the developed world. Many people have dedicated their lives to saving at least small slivers of wild Africa, and their sincerity cannot be doubted. Some of Africa's leading conservationists and scientists—among them George Adamson, Jane Goodall, and, most recently, Richard Leakey—are now hailed as heroes, after decades of working in relative anonymity. Their commitment has helped pull species back from the brink of extinction and preserve unique wild habitats. The methods these and other conservationists have often used, such as establishing parks and putting armed rangers in the field—the basic elements of an approach called "preservationism"—date from the early colonial era, and they remain important tools.

However, they can no longer stand alone. Despite the accomplishments and the goodwill, as long as conservation operates on the notion that saving wild animals means keeping them as far away as possible from human beings, it will become less and less relevant to modern Africans. Parks and other protected areas will eventually be overrun by people's need for land unless the parks serve, or are at least not completely inimical to, the needs of the local population.

The method for establishing parks has hardly changed in over a century. The process has always involved the expensive operation of removing those people living on the newly protected land. In almost all cases, the result is a park surrounded by people who were excluded from the planning of the area, do not understand its purpose, derive little or no benefit from the money poured into its creation, and hence do not support its existence. As a result, local communities develop a lasting distrust of park authorities, in part because of the glaring lack of attention those authorities, supported by conservationists, have traditionally paid to the link between park ecology, the survival of wildlife, and the livelihood of the displaced people.

Countless African societies historically co-existed successfully with wild animals, but throughout the last two centuries they have been perceived as threats. African hunters have been branded "poachers," a word laden with value judgments about the supposed heroes and villains of conservation. Rural Africans have become increasingly wary of conservation efforts. Common sense would seemingly dictate a new approach. Yet for decades each new park was hailed as a conservation triumph.

The man leading the cheers for the parks throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in Serengeti and elsewhere, was one of the towering figures of African conservation: Professor Bernhard Grzimek, president of the Frankfurt Zoological Society and former director of the Frankfurt Zoo. Grzimek embodied the traditional approach that still plays a large role in shaping conservation efforts in Africa.

In 1959, Grzimek wrote:

Africa is dying and will continue to die. Old maps and remnants of settlements and animals show that the Sahara has advanced 250 miles northward on a 1,250 mile front during the last three centuries. In that short time 390,000 square miles of good land were lost. . . . So much of Africa is dead already, must the rest follow? Must *everything* be turned into deserts, farmland, big cities, native settlements, and dry bush? One small part of the continent at least should retain its original splendor so that the black and white men who follow us will be able to see it in its awe-filled past glory.

Serengeti, at least, shall not die.

That the Serengeti lived at all was because the Maasai and their predecessors understood man's place in the savanna—a point Grzimek missed. In fact, for Grzimek the Maasai “had no business” in the Serengeti at all. “The Maasai were the cause of all our hard work,” he wrote. “A National Park must remain a primordial wilderness to be effective. No men, not even native ones, should live inside its borders.”

Grzimek followed a long line of conservationists who envisioned a system of national parks in Africa modeled on that in the United States. The mold never quite fit. While Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the rest were intended to protect magnificent landscapes, parks in Africa were created to protect large mammals. The first areas set aside were remote, largely uninhabited, and frequently disease-ridden. They fit the Western definition of wilderness, and colonial governments and then independent African states steadily enlarged upon them. As the protected areas grew larger, they collided with areas long inhabited and used as hunting grounds, pasture, or farmland.

Where park meets non-park in Africa, the seemingly obvious distinction between wilderness and civilization collapses. For Europeans and Americans, wilderness lies “out there,”

distinct from daily life and readily identifiable. In Africa, however, it is often impossible to say with certainty where the wilderness begins. Does the region patrolled by park rangers in the Serengeti—otherwise uninhabited bush—qualify as wilderness? By some definition, yes; but the Maasai and other indigenous peoples like the Wata or Wadindiga feel quite at home there. The Western notion of wilderness does not hold in Africa, because man and animals have evolved together in the continent's diverse ecosystems.

Classic conservation methods sometimes serve neither man nor animal. In the Serengeti, where such methods had their truest test, the creation of protected areas for wildlife—along with the expansion of commercial agriculture—has forced the Maasai and other settlers to reduce some parts of the savanna to desert as they destroy trees and ground cover disappears with overgrazing. Both Maasai cattle and wildlife have less food available. The breakup of the Maasai's communal areas has also led to a deterioration of the tribe's social structures. The Maasai culture is dying, and with it a value system that has sustained a community and an ecosystem for generations.

The entire modern conservation edifice rests on the ideals and visions of people other than Africans. The great majority of Africans now active in conservation were trained in the traditional Western methods of wildlife management, thus perpetuating a system created in Europe at the turn of the century and inhibiting the growth of an African conservation ethic. This raises the question of whether Africans, without Western influence, would develop a conservation ethic similar to the familiar European version. Probably not: Europeans created their conservation ethic based on the experience of nearly destroying their environment through industrialization. Africans, while they face real challenges to their environment, seem unlikely to follow the same path. Africa does not have to mimic the environmentally destructive practices of Europe and the United States before a homegrown approach to conservation takes hold.

Some conservationists maintain that the majority of Africans cannot be trusted to conserve their wildlife resources. Put in such bald terms, this attitude would garner little support, yet it is the unspoken belief that underlies many current conservation programs. The author Roderick Nash in a speech to an international conference announced that if Tanzania could not prevent poaching in the Serengeti, "we will just have to go in and buy it."

Conservation has long operated on the comfortable belief that Africa is a paradise to be defended, even against the people who have lived there for thousands of years. The continuing reluctance to accept the link between vigorous indigenous culture and the survival of wildlife has led to conservation programs doomed to eventual failure because they depend on building barriers of one sort or another between people and wildlife. Such persistent blindness is tragic, given the effort that has been put into scientific research on both animal and human societies in Africa. The Serengeti, for example, is perhaps the most intensively studied ecosystem of its size in the world, and few cultures have attracted more anthropologists than the Maasai. With reams of data in hand, conservationists, biologists, and ecologists have succeeded only in documenting, in often grisly detail, the decline of the Serengeti.

Conservationists and scientists apparently have gone about their business with blinders on, ignoring each other as well as the people affected by their decisions. While anthropologists have been busily collecting information on these same people and coming to understand their relationship with the land, and economists have developed new models of natural resource utilization, their work has only begun to be recognized by conservationists. So far, the products of seminars and colloquia have barely moved out of the academy, and have had little if any impact on the lives of individuals or on the conduct of conservation programs.

Without doubt, conservation as practiced in Africa is more sophisticated now than it was twenty-five or even five years

ago. The question is whether the refinements represent changes in the basic attitudes and values of conservation, or simply the application of modern techniques to old-fashioned ideas—a new coat of paint slapped onto old. If that is the case, eventually the cracks will show through.

The most tenacious of all the old-fashioned ideas among conservationists holds that development is the enemy because of the technology it produces—roads, dams, irrigated farms, and the like. The unspoken message is that for conservation to succeed, it has to hold back the clock. That approach had some success before human population growth and human needs began to press in on even the remotest areas. To their credit, many conservationists now realize that erecting barricades from which to make a last desperate stand against development will fail. Success lies instead in understanding that conservation and development, long at loggerheads, are two parts of a single process. Conservation cannot ignore the needs of human beings, while development that runs roughshod over the environment is doomed.

The integration of conservation, science, and development has begun in earnest across Africa, from Zimbabwe in the south to Gabon in the west to Tanzania in the east. As with any pathbreaking efforts, these projects have proceeded in fits and starts. Failures may outnumber successes for some time to come, but there is simply no other choice. Conservation will either contribute to solving the problems of the rural poor who live day to day with wild animals, or those animals will disappear.

