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# Environmental Colonialism

## *“Saving” Africa from Africans*

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ROBERT H. NELSON

Religious ideals have always been a central element in the interaction of the Western world with African society. Religion was a major motivation for the original fifteenth-century Portuguese explorations to discover the coast of Africa. Henry the Navigator was seeking to reunite European Christianity with the Christian kingdom of “Prester John,” known to have survived in isolation for approximately a thousand years in Ethiopia. In the nineteenth century, David Livingstone opened up the interior of Africa in hopes of bringing Christianity to these domains. Yet the results of these religious missions have not always been very “Christian.” Indeed, the spread of slavery and other forms of exploitation of ordinary Africans frequently followed in their wake.

The greatest current efforts to “save” Africa are associated with contemporary environmentalism. The results have not been as devastating as the experience of slavery, yet they have often served Western interests and goals much more than the interests of ordinary Africans. In some cases, local populations have been displaced and impoverished in order to create national parks and to serve other conservation objectives. Under the banner of saving the African environment, Africans in the last half century have been subjected to a new form of “environmental colonialism.”

Many informed observers have held the view, although not well known to the general public in Europe and the United States, that environmental activism exhibits a neocolonial character in Africa. Raymond Bonner, for example, came newly to the African scene in the early 1990s from a long career in investigative journalism. He

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found that most of his preconceptions about African wildlife management—typical of popular attitudes shaped by conservation organizations and an uncritical Western media—were wrong. Indeed, he would write that “the longer I stayed in Africa, . . . the more I realized that the issues weren’t so simple. . . . I realized that the way I, a Westerner, looked at wildlife wasn’t necessarily the way Africans did” (1993, 7). As Africans achieve greater political maturity, however, Bonner thought, they will no longer “allow themselves to be dominated by Europe and the United States” (286). “They threw off colonialism” once, and Bonner now predicted that “one day they will throw off eco-colonialism” (286) in the management of their wildlife and other aspects of the environment.

In further exploring the neocolonial character of Western environmentalism in the African setting, I draw here on an impressive body of recent scholarly research. Many of these studies are by people who would be placed on the traditional left of the political spectrum. As seen from their perspective, it is no longer businessmen who are today most likely to be exploiting Africans for their own gain (most current capitalists are actually almost entirely indifferent to Africa, preferring to put their money elsewhere, where the returns are higher and more predictable), but rather the activities of the environmental movement.

I am not suggesting that the problems of environmental colonialism have gone entirely unnoticed until now; some observers, even some within important components of the environmental community, have noticed it. Indeed, for at least a decade international conservationists based for the most part in southern and eastern Africa have led a strong movement for community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) (Hulme and Murphree 2001; Western, Wright, and Strum 1994). The CBNRM advocates have argued that successful wildlife conservation requires the assistance of local African populations (Child 1995; Murombedzi 1992) and have emphasized the importance of local economic benefits in order to create positive incentives for the protection of wildlife.

The efforts of such African conservationists, however, have often been undermined by their European and American counterparts (Hutton and Dickson 2000). Financial contributors and other environmental supporters in Europe and the United States have found the myths of Africa more attractive than the realities. The international commitment to CBNRM so far has been more rhetorical than real. Although environmental colonialism is no longer as overt as it was in the original colonial era prior to the 1960s, it has continued in practice in the policies of many current African governments.

A number of the leading examples of past and present environmental colonialism are found in Tanzania, even though this nation is often considered to be among the most enlightened of African countries—a place where the corruption of government, the exploitation of ordinary people, the divisions of tribalism, and other African ills have been less severe. Yet in Tanzania, too, the creation of national parks and other game preserves has been and still is being accomplished only with the displacement of

native tribal groups from their historic homelands, leaving them worse off economically and in some cases in dire poverty today.

Like Christianity historically, current environmentalism is possessed of a strong missionary spirit. In this respect and others, the rise of environmental colonialism is not unrelated to Christianity in defending forms of colonialism. Hence, a brief digression on the religious character of modern environmentalism and its relationship to the Christian religious heritage of the West helps to set the stage for the subsequent parts of this article (see also Nelson 1990, 1993, 1997).

## Environmental Fundamentalism

The environmental movement is best understood as a complex—and ultimately confused—reaction to some of the more disturbing elements of “the modern project.” For many people, scientific knowledge undermined traditional Christian belief. In Europe today, the Christian churches are more museum pieces than vital institutions of society. The modern age often substituted a belief in economic progress: in Marxism, socialism, and other secular faiths, hopes for a new heaven on earth replaced expectations of salvation in the hereafter (Nelson 1991, 2001). Yet the history of the twentieth century put the lie to the conviction that material progress would transform human nature, that a “new man” (and woman) would emerge from the enjoyment of far greater material abundance than had ever been known previously to human experience. Germany, Japan, Russia, and other nations did experience unprecedented economic growth and development, but that “progress” seemed more to disorient their world than to save them from sinful actions.

Thus, as the end of the twentieth century approached, a religious vacuum in Western society existed. Neither traditional Christianity nor the secular twentieth-century religions of progress could fulfil the spiritual aspirations of large numbers of people. In this circumstance, the contemporary environmental movement emerged as one way to fill the vacuum. Environmentalism has some very prosaic goals, such as making the air less polluted and reducing the incidence of cancer. Within the wide scope of the environmental movement, some card-carrying environmentalists are committed merely to making the world a more pleasant place in which to live. One might say that their goal is to carry on in the progressive tradition, taking some further steps toward the improvement—and perhaps ultimately the perfection—of the human condition.

Yet much of the crusading energy of current environmentalism derives from a much different source. For many of its followers today, environmentalism has been a substitute for fading mainline Christian and progressive faiths—its religious quality obvious to any close observer of its workings. Its language is often overtly religious: “saving” the earth from rape and pillage; building “cathedrals” in the wilderness; creating a new “Noah’s Ark” with laws such as the Endangered Species Act; pursuing a new “calling” to preserve the remaining wild areas; and taking steps to protect what

is left of “the Creation” on earth. At the heart of the environmental message is a new story of the fall of mankind from a previous, happier, and more natural and innocent time—a secular vision of the biblical fall from the Garden of Eden.

Before the corrupting influence of modern civilization (and perhaps the true date of the fall can be traced as far back as the rise of agriculture, almost ten thousand years ago), human beings lived in genuine harmony with nature. Since the fall, the rise of acquisitive urges and the destructive powers of modern science and industrial production have defiled the innocence of nature almost everywhere. Environmentalism therefore seeks to protect the vestiges of the original natural order and perhaps in some places to restore a “true” nature—the original Creation, as it is in effect regarded within the movement—that has been lost.

The idealism of this vision is not in question; neither is the need for a religious faith to give meaning to the events of the world. However, contemporary environmentalism has lacked any well-developed body of thought to explicate its theology in a careful fashion. There has been no Thomas Aquinas of environmentalism to work out the core precepts of the faith and to ensure that they are logically ordered and rigorously defensible and that they meet other requirements of intellectual and theological coherence. For example, writing of the movement to protect nature in Great Britain, W. M. Adams notes that “conservation in the UK has grown up without a coherent philosophy, a cultural and scientific rag-bag of passion, insight and good intentions.” There is a familiar “set of practical concerns (rare species, characteristic habitats, beautiful landscapes) and a set of recognized and institutionalized activities (particularly the complex pattern of British protected areas) [but] underneath this established pattern, conservation floats on a maelstrom of diverse ideas” (1996, 99).

Despite its modern appearance, environmentalism is closer to an old-fashioned form of religious fundamentalism, perhaps reflecting the fact that John Muir, Dave Foreman, and other leading sources of inspiration for the environmental movement were spawned by forms of Protestant fundamentalism. For modern environmentalism, as for the classical Protestantism of old, the core religious understanding is not achieved by a process of rational understanding (in the Protestantism of Martin Luther and John Calvin, it was by “faith alone”). Indeed, although modern environmentalism sometimes has put science to use for its purposes, at heart it has been deeply skeptical of science. The rise of modern science has been the decisive factor in the destruction of the natural order. Martin Luther, it might be noted, similarly regarded Thomas Aquinas’s more rational and intellectual exposition of the truths of Christianity as a negation of true religion, as the actual death of any possibilities for a valid faith. Modern environmentalism in some cases has been in direct conflict with scientific facts and knowledge.

For people who have regarded the environmental movement as a branch of science, the level of indifference to scientific knowledge and fact often comes as a surprise. Ecologist Daniel Botkin, for example, explains his motive for writing the book *Discordant Harmonies*, wherein he seeks to provide a more scientific basis for environmental policy:

In the mid-1970s, I confronted several curious contradictions that I attempted to explain: decisions about managing nature were based on ideas that were clearly contradicted by facts; in my own field of ecology, those same ideas dominated, yet the facts that contradicted them were gathered by ecologists. We repeatedly failed to deal successfully with our environment, and we seemed to ignore the very facts that could most help us. . . . The search for an explanation led down many paths and required peeling back layer after layer of impression and observation. At the surface were the activities of our society: scientists doing research; legislators signing bills; government officials dealing with policies. Underneath these was a layer of belief, myth and assumption, of symbol and metaphor. . . . [At issue was] the character of nature undisturbed. . . . What is the proper role for human beings in nature? At this level, the solution to the paradox lies with a shift of perception, the change in metaphor, myth, and assumption. (1991, vii)

Environmentalism was in fact answering questions similar to those answered by Genesis in the Bible. Indeed, despite the secular overlay of environmental language, the environmental answers were often remarkably similar to the biblical answers, and in some cases the tension with modern scientific realities was equally as great, although this tension was not sufficient to dissuade true believers in either case.

Religion can be a double-edged sword: though necessary for human existence, it has the potential to create havoc in society as well. Following the rise of the new Christian fundamentalism of the Protestant Reformation, Europe was plunged into 150 years of terrible religious warfare. Hence, it is not enough that the environmentalists of today are religiously well meaning, that they genuinely desire to save the world, and that some of them are willing to make significant personal sacrifices in the service of their highest ideals. The ideas of environmentalism must be subject to a searching critical analysis and scrutiny. The environmentalists' efforts must be judged by their real consequences, not by their intended outcomes. When the members of the environmental movement are (largely) unwilling to undertake such a searching inquiry, it falls to others to perform the task.

In the remainder of this article, I review the rise of a new environmental colonialism in Africa and draw many of my examples from the Tanzanian experience, which has been especially well documented.

## Hollywood Africa

In *The Myth of Wild Africa* (1996), Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane describe how images of nature in Africa have been crafted to appeal to European preconceptions. The image of the "noble savage" has had an enduring attraction for many Western minds. Even though Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone knew

better, he wrote for the English public in the mid–nineteenth century that “to one who has observed the hard toil of the poor in civilized countries, the state in which the inhabitants [of Africa] live is one of glorious ease. . . . Food abounds and very little effort is needed for its cultivation; the soil is so rich that no manure is required” (qtd. in Adams and McShane 1996, 15). This account exemplified a common depiction of Africa as a virtual Garden of Eden, innocent of the ills of modern civilization. As Roderick Neumann has observed, “The identity myth of a colonizing society returning to or discovering an earthly Eden is deeply implicated in the establishment of national parks [in Africa]” (1998, 18). (This romantic image, to be sure, often conflicted with another common view of Africa as a land of wild savages whom Christian religion and modern ways of living must rescue from a barbaric condition.)

Today, Africa is still being presented in such Edenic terms. However, the Eden myth with Africans present has been supplanted by images of an Edenic wilderness in which current Africans, as well as non-Africans (except tourists), must be excluded. Neumann aptly comments, “national parks in Tanzania could accommodate the presence of the noble savage for only a brief time” (1998, 18). In Western eyes, the original innocence of nature is now found in places where modern Africans themselves are kept out because they have acquired the technical power to subject nature to human domination. Thus, the African Eden now survives only in protected places such as the national parks created in many African countries.

These parks are marketed to Western tourists as places where they can see nature in its “true” form. A recent promotional brochure of a South African safari operator, for example, explains that:

Tanzania, the land of Kilimanjaro and undoubtedly one of the most beautiful countries of Africa, boasts some of the most sensational wildlife refuges in the world. Tanzania has long been considered the finest safari destination in all of Africa and within its borders lie legendary game reserves and game areas that combine incredible concentrations of wildlife. The Ngorongoro crater and the Serengeti National Park contain almost two million animals. The Selous Game Reserve [in southeastern Tanzania] is the largest wildlife reserve in all of Africa, much of it totally unexplored. Here the lion remains “king of beasts” over large populations of buffalo. It is remote and peaceful, but more importantly, it is the true Africa, undamaged and unspoilt. (Mafigeni Safari and Tours 2002)

Such imagery boosts tourist interest in the Selous Game Reserve and serves both the interests of safari operators and the revenue goals of the Tanzanian national government, but it has almost nothing to do with the reality of Selous history. Until the end of World War I, Germany controlled the colony of Tanganyika. In 1905, the native Africans living in the Selous area revolted against their colonial masters. Finding it difficult to defeat the small guerrilla groups of Africans by direct military means,

the Germans adopted a strategy of deliberately starving the local populations. As John Reader explains in his magisterial history of the African continent, “three columns advanced through the region, pursuing a scorched earth policy—creating famine. People were forced from their homes, villages were burned to the ground; food crops that could not be taken away or given to loyal groups were destroyed” (1999, 600). By some estimates, as many as three hundred thousand Africans died, perhaps a third of the total population in the area.

In this fashion, the groundwork was laid for the eventual creation of the Selous Game Reserve, advertised today as “the true Africa, undamaged and unspoilt.” Reader can hardly contain his sarcasm in describing the ironies of the situation:

Paraphrasing Tacitus’ verdict on the Roman warfare in Germany, a commentator wrote that “the Germans in East Africa made a solitude and called it a peace.” The *Maji-Maji* districts were at peace again, but it was the peace of the wilderness. Survivors attempting to re-establish themselves in the region found it transformed, with forest encroaching on village sites and game reoccupying previously cultivated land. More ominously, the tsetse fly was there too. . . . For agriculturalists in the southern regions of German East Africa, . . . vast areas of their homeland were uninhabitable; from its midst the British colonial administration [which had replaced the Germans after World War I] carved out the world’s largest game park—the Selous. (600)

To be sure, in an area as large as the Selous, some African populations survived. A population of forty thousand scattered through the Liwale District had to be removed in order to create the Selous Reserve. In his 1977 classic *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History*, Helge Kjekshus (former lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam) reports that “the man in charge of the operations, Rooke Johnston, . . . held that development [of the Selous] depended on the eradication of all human rights and interests in the areas” (178). Johnston would write that in this pursuit “I went all out to achieve what I had conceived in 1931 to be the betterment of Liwale District and its people, namely its elimination.” If the Selous appears today to be “wild Africa,” it is really the product of the extermination and removal of its peoples by deliberate European strategy in the twentieth century. Earlier, thriving populations of Africans had actively engaged in the manipulation of the Selous environment for their benefit.

## The Rinderpest Plague

Most of the national park areas of Africa were not depopulated by military means and administrative actions, however. Instead, as in North and South America a few centuries earlier, diseases introduced by Europeans wiped out native populations. Many



Africans died from smallpox, which was introduced from Europe and to which Africans had no natural immunity. Unlike in the Americas, the new diseases in Africa had the greatest impact on its animal populations. Reader describes the rinderpest epidemic of the late nineteenth century as “the greatest natural calamity ever to befall the African continent, a calamity which has no natural parallel elsewhere” (1999, 589). Between 1889 and the early 1900s, the rinderpest plague killed 90 to 95 percent of all the cattle in Africa. The rinderpest first appeared in Somaliland and spread rapidly to engulf the entire continent, reaching as far as Cape Town in South Africa. Goats and sheep also were affected. For the many African tribes that depended on livestock, their economic means of support was decimated. Whole areas where livestock raising had traditionally taken place were depopulated. By one estimate, two-thirds of the Maasai population in Tanzania died as a result of the rinderpest plague (Reader 1999, 590).

The rinderpest affected wildlife as well. Over wide areas of Africa, the existing populations of buffalo, giraffe, eland, most small antelopes, and warthogs were virtually wiped out. Thus, ordinary Africans suffered the loss of this traditional source of sustenance as well. The ecological balance that had kept the tsetse fly under control was in turn disrupted. Cattle grazing traditionally had kept the grasslands from growing into dense fields and thickets. With cattle removed and much of the wildlife gone also, these grasslands could grow without any check from the clipping and thinning of animal foraging. The new habitat that grew up was much better suited to the tsetse fly. In Uganda, an estimated two hundred thousand people died between 1902 and 1906 from sleeping sickness spread by new hordes of tsetse flies that spread across the landscape.

The native wildlife populations of Africa had long been exposed to tsetse flies and were immune to the sleeping sickness the flies spread by their bites. Domestic cattle were a more recent arrival to the continent and were susceptible, along with humans, to the disease. With most of Africa’s cattle now dead, large areas of habitat were newly available for wildlife without the traditional competition from livestock. Even though the rinderpest had decimated wild animals as well, they rebounded rapidly. Thus, in the early twentieth century, free of traditional cattle grazing and other human impacts, large areas of Africa had newly abundant wildlife populations. For European conservationists, typically ignorant of the recent ecological history of the continent, this landscape appeared to be the “true Africa” of wild game.

That African conservationists and game park managers lack basic scientific knowledge is an observation of long standing. In 1973, A. D. Graham would declare, based on his long experience in Kenya and other parts of Africa, that “to the scientist it was their abysmal professional ignorance that was so disappointing. Simple facts about the animals and the wilderness were evidently quite unknown to the conservationists. Yet, almost without exception, the preservationists themselves claimed a profound knowledge of those very facts; claimed them in fact with such authority that the uninitiated accepted their distinction without demur” (27).

The conservationists actively sought to set aside preserves in natural parks in order to prevent the recurrence of human impacts. Reader again describes these

events—the source of much of the national parkland of current eastern and southern Africa—with dripping sarcasm:

The overall effect of the rinderpest plague, compounded by initial depopulation and the subsequent migration of people away from the bite of the tsetse fly, was to shift the ecological balance of the trypanosome [sleeping sickness] cycle heavily in favour of wild-animal populations. In East Africa in particular, areas which had once supported large and relatively prosperous populations of herders and farmers were transformed into tsetse-infested bush and woodland inhabited only by wild animals. Influential colonists during the colonial period assumed that these regions were precious examples of African environments which had existed since time began. Believing that the plains and woodlands packed with animals were a manifestation of “natural” perfection, untouched by humanity, they declared that they should be preserved from human depredation for evermore. Most are now tsetse-infested game parks: Serengeti, the Masai Mara, Tsavo, Selous, Ruaha, Luangwa, Kafue, Wankie, Okayango, Kruger. (1999, 592)

Kjekshus similarly reports that long before Europeans arrived in the late nineteenth century, ordinary Africans had established “a relationship between man and his environment which had grown out of centuries of clearing the ground, introducing managed vegetations, and controlling the fauna” ([1977] 1996, 181). A main goal of this active management of the environment was to limit the harmful influence of the tsetse fly, and, indeed, for centuries such management had succeeded in making the tsetse fly “a largely irrelevant consideration for economic prosperity” (181). This happy world was destroyed at the beginning of the twentieth century when an “eruption of tsetse-borne sleeping sickness epidemics” produced a “sudden human and cattle depopulation and the attendant loss of control over the environment” (181). In the larger scope of East African history, Kjekshus considers that the social impacts of these ecological developments exceeded even “earlier events like slave-raiding and intertribal warfare, to which historians have given so much attention” (181).

The creation of a national park in eastern and southern Africa thus typically served to prevent ordinary Africans from reoccupying areas from which they had been expelled by European military force and disease in the previous half century. The “true Africa” seen by tourists visiting the parks was the product of the decimation of traditional African life in the aftermath of the arrival of European settlement.

Ironically, the creation of a park area would also serve to change the behavior of the wild animals. Lions previously had never allowed humans to approach within a few feet, as is now possible in vehicles in park areas. The national parks of Africa increasingly are taking on the character of large open-air zoos. The tourists love the experience because they can see animals that in earlier times would have taken care to

stay far removed from any human presence. If today someone wants to see the behavior of a “natural” lion, he can find the closest approximations in the areas *outside* park boundaries, where Africans continue to hunt lions.

### The “Paradise” of Serengeti

Kruger National Park in South Africa was created in 1926. The Convention for the Protection of African Flora and Fauna met in London in 1933. Of this meeting, Jonathan Adams and Thomas McShane write that “the age of Africa’s national parks truly began with the international agreement of 1933” (1996, 47). The events of World War II intervened, but soon afterward the colonial administrations were creating war national parks across Africa (MacKenzie 1988). In 1951, the British administrators of Tanganyika created the Serengeti National Park (which had already been protected under a less-formal status), today perhaps the most famous national park in the world and widely (but of course wrongly) regarded as a surviving remnant of “original Africa.” The park is 5,600 square miles, about the size of Connecticut.

For several centuries, the Maasai people, themselves invaders from the north, had occupied the Serengeti area. In the mid-nineteenth century, before the arrival of Europeans, some fifty thousand Maasai occupied large areas of what is now Kenya and north-central Tanzania. The Maasai lifestyle was based on the raising of cattle, and therefore the Maasai were among the tribes decimated by the rinderpest. The Maasai also lost large parts of their land as a result of colonial policies that evicted them in order to make way for European agricultural settlement. Yet another large part of the Maasai land was taken away for the creation of national parks—not only Serengeti but Tarangire and Lake Manyara National Parks in Tanzania, as well as the Nairobi, Amboseli, and Tsavo National Parks in Kenya (along with the Masai Mara National Reserve, also in Kenya).

As a result of the ecological consequences of the rinderpest, in 1951 “woodlands covered the northern reaches of the Serengeti, though less than half a century earlier the area had been open, grassy plains, inhabited by people and their animals” (Adams and McShane 1996, 48). Leading conservationists persisted in calling Serengeti “a glimpse into Africa as it was before the white man ever crossed its shores” (from a 1955 report by the Royal National Parks Department, qtd. in Adams and McShane 1996, 48), but the truth was closer to the opposite. The European arrival in the late nineteenth century had massively altered both the human and the wildlife circumstances of the Serengeti. The Europeans who saw wild nature in the Serengeti were actually seeing the product of their own recent manipulations. The Serengeti was now a large “garden,” some parts the (unintended) equivalent of wild weeds, other parts more like (intended) domestic plants.

Before the manipulations of the past 125 years,

Tsetse had long inhabited the no-man’s-land between African settlements, such as the ungrazed areas that separated one Maasai settlement from

another in and around the Serengeti Plain. Africans knew of these focal points of infection and avoided them, while Maasai cattle ate young sprouts, preventing them from maturing into tough, thorny scrub, and thus kept the tsetse in check. The hunting practices of tribes other than the Maasai also helped deter the spread of tsetse by regulating wildlife populations that could provide hosts for the flies. Africans . . . had thus established “a mobile ecological equilibrium” with wildlife and their associated diseases.

The equilibrium collapsed when Africans and their cattle began dying in large numbers from diseases brought by Europeans. On the Serengeti and elsewhere, a vicious cycle began: the bush returned because cattle no longer kept the bush down, the flies multiplied, further lowering both human and cattle populations, leading to more habitat for tsetse, and so on. (Adams and McShane 1996, 49)

Yet in areas outside the protected national parks, new forces in the 1950s and 1960s would again radically alter the ecological order. The new availability of modern medicines led to the recovery and significant increase of Maasai populations. In the late 1950s, a new campaign was waged against the tsetse fly, using modern insecticides and traps. As the Maasai experienced greater health and vitality, they returned to older burning practices on the plains that further reduced the habitat suited to tsetse flies. Maasai cattle numbers again grew rapidly, pressing against the capacity of the grazing resource to support these numbers, especially in light of the large areas of traditional Maasai lands now converted to agriculture and set aside in national parks and other reserves.

The Maasai looked to return to their former grazing lands in the national parks, and in the mid-1950s the Tanganyika legislature voted to cut the size of Serengeti park in half in order to allow them to reoccupy the central plain. This change would have provided the Maasai with much-needed flexibility as they moved their cattle from area to area according to traditional practice. It also would have posed little hazard to wildlife; populations of livestock and wildlife had previously coexisted in these areas for centuries. Moreover, the Maasai—unusual among African tribes—have religious prohibitions against the routine killing and eating of wild animals in times when there was no shortage of food.

Led by famed international conservationist Bernhard Grzimek, president of the Frankford Zoological Society, the world conservation movement mobilized to block any such Maasai aspirations, however. Because the British still made the final decisions in colonial Tanganyika, the plan to reduce Serengeti was soon shelved. The center of controversy then shifted to the Ngorongoro Crater, where the Maasai had begun grazing as a result of the loss of their traditional grazing areas in Serengeti and elsewhere. Grzimek led a campaign to evict the Maasai from this area as well in order to create yet another area “free of human impact.” The Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) was set aside in 1959, and Maasai cattle grazing was banned within the area of the crater.

In a compromise reflecting a greater recognition of the needs of native Africans, grazing was allowed in the 1960s in some areas outside the Ngorongoro crater but within the NCA. Agriculture was also permitted within these areas, allowing the Maasai to support cattle populations in part through raising grain. However, in 1975 the Tanzanian government banned agriculture altogether in the NCA, thereby essentially eliminating any feasibility of sustainable livestock raising there by the Maasai.

The modern environmental movement is no gentle society of aristocrats. The many triumphs of environmentalism over the past half century have been won by hardball practitioners of politics and media relations. As John McPhee (1971) memorably describes in *Conversations with the Archdruid*, Sierra Club leader David Brower pioneered these methods in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s in battles over Dinosaur National Monument, the Grand Canyon, and other park areas. For Brower and many other environmental activists to come, factual accuracy would have to take a back seat to practical results when the fate of the earth was at stake.

While Brower was working away in North America, Grzimek was applying the same kinds of hardball tactics on the African environmental scene. He produced an internationally acclaimed book and film of the same name, *Serengeti Must Not Die*. Although enormously influential, this book was also, as Adams and McShane report in hindsight, “another of Grzimek’s propaganda tools, filled with misleading, often falsified data.” The overall image, immensely appealing in its own way to European and American audiences, was “that Africa is dying and . . . what little remains must be saved from mankind” (1996, 53)—that is to say, saved from the Maasai use of the land as it had been taking place for several centuries. Adams and McShane summarize this infamous episode in conservation history:

In 1959, Tanganyika seemed poised to take the crucial step of allowing local people to share their land with wild animals in and around a protected area. Bernhard Grzimek, however, was horrified at the thought of people wandering around in “his” national park, so he fought the NCA as he fought all the battles over wildlife conservation, with any weapon at his disposal; “First by soft line, then by hard line, next by bribery, and if necessary by outright blackmail,” according to one journalist. . . . Grzimek once described himself as “a showman of pity.” Indeed, his campaigns to save wild animals were based on manipulating the emotions and expectations of both the general public in Europe and politicians in Africa.

The NCA is today just another park or preserve, and a poorly managed one at that. The goals set for the NCA in 1959 . . . have never been realized. The harmonious existence of people, livestock, and wild animals has not been achieved, and the rights and needs of the local Maasai community are often ignored. (1996, 53)

Reflecting similar outcomes across many parts of Africa, Barnabas Dickson commented recently that “when the effect of past conservation policies on indigenous

people is properly recognized, the record is a shameful one” (2000, 176). He describes the “colonial approach to conservation”—often carried forward by new African governments even in the aftermath of the colonial era—as both a practical failure and “unjust”:

[This] approach involved the state assuming ownership of wildlife and instigating widespread restrictions on the use of wildlife. . . . [But] it did not work because the rural people living closest to wildlife had little incentive to conserve wildlife. Since they had no legal claim on that wildlife they saw little long-term gain from it. On the contrary, it was often a threat to their livelihoods (when wild animals destroyed their crops) and sometimes to their lives. They had no reason not to acquiesce in poaching and positive reason to engage in the practice themselves. In these circumstances, it should not have been surprising that state attempts to protect wildlife often ended in failure. The colonial approach was condemned as unjust because the colonial authorities had deprived indigenous people of a valuable resource that, prior to colonialization, they had regarded as their own. In addition, the state typically sought to protect wildlife under its nominal ownership by the use of extremely harsh methods, including the extra-judicial execution of suspected poachers. (176)

### **Mkomazi Game Reserve, 1988**

One might have thought that the end of the colonial era in Africa would have brought the end of environmental colonialism as well. The forms of European influence on environmental policy did indeed shift; it was no longer possible simply to issue an administrative edict from London or Paris. However, African nations and governments survived in a condition of great dependence on outside donor agencies. For the Africans who were fortunate enough to be able to live a Western lifestyle, the money to pay for it typically came from these agencies and from foreign tourists and other foreign sources. Continuation of the flow of money depended in significant part on a deep respect for the wishes of Europeans and Americans, including prominently international environmental organizations and their constituencies.

The European conquest of Africa often exploited the deep divisions among Africans themselves. Much earlier, the practice of slavery had depended on the Africans’ willingness to capture, transport, and sell slaves to European (and Arab) slave traders. There have always been Africans who have found that serving outside needs and demands was the easiest route to their own prosperity and well-being. Their advantage, admittedly, was frequently derived from the suffering of other Africans. The bonds among different tribes and different regions of Africa have never been strong. In the most recent illustration of this phenomenon, African government administrators of protected park and wildlife areas have sought actively to please

European and American donors and clients even as ordinary Africans suffered from their actions. In Kenya in 2002, the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission, created by the government, listened to local people throughout the country and reported back that “one of the most common areas of complaint related to the use of land for game parks but to the exclusion of the local people” (Constitution of Kenya Review Commission 2002). The commission heard of “a sense experienced very widely: that local control of resources, and therefore of their lives, had been wrested away” by outsiders.

Sharing a long border, Kenya and Tanzania were similar in this respect. In 1988, the local inhabitants of Mkomazi Game Reserve in northeastern Tanzania were expelled from the area by action of the Tanzanian national government. In *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania* (2002), Dan Brockington describes the circumstances that led to this action and the consequences for the people there—yet another story of environmental colonialism. The new twist, however, is that native Tanzanians stepped into the shoes of the old colonial overseers. Similar developments occurred widely over the African continent. In nation after nation, new African governing elites captured old colonial instruments of state control for their own private purposes (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999).

As Brockington explains, “the rural poor in Africa tend to be weak and marginal to their countries’ affairs.” In Mkomazi and many other places, “they can be, and often are, ignored by their rulers.” By contrast, “conservation receives continual and valuable support from a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which lobby and raise money for conservation causes. They provide valuable funds to African governments” (2002, 10). Foreign tourism also brings in large revenues that can be used to support the Africans who staff government agencies. The NGOs are important not only for the direct infusions of money they contribute but also for the political legitimacy they provide. According to Brockington, “the resources provided by conservation interests, as well as the powerful rhetoric of providing for future generations, may serve to justify the existence of protected areas to government officials” (10) who themselves benefit significantly from the existence of these areas.

The Mkomazi Game Reserve is located in northeastern Tanzania adjacent to the border with Kenya. The reserve was formally established in 1951 in order to protect an area with significant numbers of elephants and other wild animals (the area is part of the broader ecosystem that includes Tsavo National Park in Kenya). In deference to longstanding use, the grazing of cattle was allowed to continue in the eastern part of the reserve; in 1969, the western part also was opened to livestock grazing. In subsequent years, the numbers of domestic animals in the reserve increased rapidly, reaching a total of ninety thousand cattle and thirty thousand sheep and goats in 1984. As part of this grazing use, some settlement also occurred.

Arguing that this livestock use was degrading the reserve and reducing its value for wildlife preservation, international conservation organizations pressed the Tan-

zania national government for the expulsion of the livestock from the reserve. They argued that the heaviest grazing users were not indigenous to the area and thus had less moral claim to continued use. Initial efforts to remove the livestock had limited success in the face of local resistance, but in 1986 the Tanzanian Department of Wildlife finally issued an order to remove all livestock and associated settlement. The actual removal took place in large part in 1988. Although some illegal use continued, it is estimated that the number of cattle in the reserve decreased by 75 percent. The people evicted suffered severe and uncompensated economic losses, but, aided by international human rights groups, Maasai and Parakuyo tribesmen eventually brought court cases seeking compensation for those losses.

In reviewing this history, Brockington (2002) finds that the truth is illusive in the midst of numerous claims and counterclaims. In a complex ecological system—both in human and in plant and animal terms—it would require large resources to undertake the scientific studies required to disentangle all the various factors. One of the major uncertainties concerns the impact of grazing. According to one scientific view, “the disturbance caused by grazing and burning does not necessarily cause damage; it is more likely to result in disturbances that foster biodiversity. Livestock do not necessarily exclude wildlife, rather the greatest concentrations of wildlife in East Africa depend on pastures grazed with livestock” (Brockington 2002, 56). Indeed, livestock grazing is not a recent innovation on the continent; it has been a part of the African ecological dynamic for thousands of years. The absence of livestock does not protect “original nature,” but rather creates something brand new.

All in all, as Brockington concludes, “there is no clear evidence about the effect of people and their stock on the biodiversity of the Reserve. It remains possible that they enhanced it” (2002, 73). He also refutes the claims about the benefits of the absence of a long-term presence of grazing in the reserve. He portrays systematic misuse of information by world conservation organizations in their enthusiasm to “save” a part of Africa. These organizations and their allies in the Tanzanian government frequently claimed that the Mkomazi Reserve was “one of the richest savannas in Africa and possibly the world in terms of rare and endemic fauna and flora” (Tanzanian Department of Wildlife, *Draft Management Plan*, qtd. in Brockington 2002, 80). The reality is that, “as regards biodiversity, Mkomazi is species-rich for plants and birds, but not outstanding in global or regional terms” (80). There is nothing extraordinary about the mammal populations, although “invertebrates are numerous” (80). Overall, any grand claims for biodiversity in Mkomazi are misleading; the “evaluation of its conservation value awaits better research in similar ecosystems” (80) that may in fact be biologically richer. Yet the international conservation organizations engaged in a powerful campaign in Europe and America in the 1980s to portray Mkomazi as a unique biological resource in Africa, thus justifying the removal of the local African populations from the area.

In Brockington’s view, “the international representation of Mkomaze ends up being an almost Orwellian rewriting of the Reserve’s, and its people’s, histories”



(2002, 126). The advocates of exclusion of people were driven by the familiar myths of a “wild Africa” that must be maintained in its “original wilderness” condition. The emotional power of these images for European and American audiences is not in doubt; nor is their usefulness for fund-raising purposes. From a crassly cynical point of view, one might suggest that the spreading of fictions can promote the maximum utility in society: the fictions do make many people feel good. In this sense, although the international conservation organizations belong in the same category as Hollywood producers of illusion, the propagation of their myths may actually enhance the world’s total economic product.

Indeed, if social science is truly to be value neutral, as it often claims to be, there may be no grounds to object to the use of falsehoods that make people feel better. It is obvious that Brockington personally is offended by the outcomes he observed in the course of his Mkomazi research. Feeding the emotional needs of Europeans and Americans on the backs of the rural African poor is not a pretty sight. However, Brockington also recognizes an obligation to the canons of the academy that supposedly limit subjective judgments based on strong personal moral convictions. Thus, at some points in *Fortress Conservation*, he attempts to adopt an “objective” posture with respect to the international conservation organizations’ obvious illusions and deceptions:

The case of Mkomazi suggests two reasons for the strength of fortress conservation [that requires the exclusion of people]. The first is that myths work. The Mkomazi myths can bring in much revenue. They result in the enforcement of exclusion and the creation of wilderness in the image desired by the creators. Myths may be wrong, but that is not the point. Myths are powerful. They motivate people; they help them to organize and understand their worlds; they provide structure and meaning; they are the source of beliefs, hopes and plans. (2002, 126)

Beliefs that help people “organize and understand their worlds” are often called religions. In the developed Western world, environmental religion has exerted an extraordinarily strong attraction for many people over the past thirty-five years. In a world of rapid change, where new scientific discoveries are announced every day, many people feel disoriented. The citizens of the developed world seem willing to cling to any rock available, and the environmental movement has offered them hopes that some vestiges of real and permanent “nature” can be found. These last remaining places where human impacts have supposedly not already transformed the natural world must be preserved as “wilderness.” Even if very little is historically accurate in all this, environmental religion would not be the first religion to maintain a hold over masses of believers in the face of strong contrary scientific evidence.

As Daniel Botkin observes, “there is no longer any part of the Earth that is untouched by our actions in some way, either directly or indirectly.” As a result,

“there are no wildernesses in the sense of places completely unaffected by people” (1990, 194). Yet, for many people, the idea of “true nature” unaffected by human action is a necessary benchmark for their dealing with the natural world. Without it, they lack a sense of purpose and direction in the human interaction with nature. It is as though “God is dead” in a modern sense. Botkin is aware of this element and describes the psychological disorientation that many people feel in the face of modern scientific knowledge of the disorderly realities of the natural world:

To abandon a belief in the constancy of undisturbed nature is psychologically uncomfortable. As long as we could believe that nature undisturbed was constant, we were provided with a simple standard against which to judge our actions, . . . providing us with a sense of continuity and permanence that was comforting. Abandoning those beliefs leaves us in an extreme existential position: we are like small boats without anchors in a sea of time; how we long for safe harbor on a shore. (1990, 188–89)

In the face of this “extreme existential position,” many people will prefer to find comfort in myth. They will believe something—whatever it is—before they will believe nothing. That inclination is a major problem facing those who would seek a more scientifically informed environmental debate. Indeed, many fundamentalist Christians today also continue to believe in “the Creation” as literally presented in the Bible, despite strong scientific evidence to the contrary.

### Arusha National Park

Yet another rendition of the myth of wild Africa in Tanzania involves Arusha National Park, set aside as a reserve in 1953 and made into a national park in 1960. Roderick Neumann examines this case in *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (1998). Arusha is Tanzania’s third largest city, the jumping-off point for many visitors to Serengeti National Park and the NCA as well as for climbers of nearby Mt. Kilimanjaro. Arusha National Park is not in the same category of world attraction, but it does receive large numbers of visitors, reflecting its close proximity to a major city. Its most prominent physical feature is Mt. Meru, more than sixteen thousand feet high, which looms spectacularly over the city of Arusha.

This story, as Neumann relates it, is yet another in which “the portrayal of the national park as pristine nature symbolically and materially appropriates the landscape of Mount Meru for the consumptive pleasures of foreign tourists while denying its human history” (1998, 13). The more recent “European appropriation of

the African landscape for aesthetic consumption” follows directly in the path of an earlier colonial tradition of “appropriation of African land for material production” (9).

Arusha National Park is surrounded by local populations of Meru and other tribes engaged in agriculture. The relationship between park authorities and the surrounding villages has changed little from colonial times, characterized as it is by deep suspicions on both sides. The villagers must respect the superior coercive power available to park managers, but they attempt to subvert park management through poaching of animals, capture of plants, and other forms of illegal activity that are difficult to detect and prevent. Neumann found that “much like their colonial predecessors, state authorities [now] present an implied and often explicit image of villagers as either backward peasants or as criminals” (192). For their part, the villagers make “serious accusations of abuse” with respect to the park guards. In one example, “a villager said that after the right-of-way was closed, the guards would beat people and rape the women that they caught inside [the park]” (189).

For the villagers living today in proximity to Arusha National Park, there are clear “parallels between the park [management] and colonialism.” The people living near the park still experience at present “a humiliation and deprivation that . . . cannot do other than resurrect memories of the worst injustices of the colonial government” (Neumann 1998, 194). For one thing, the park was largely formed from lands that had been taken from local Africans in order to make them available for German and then British settlement. After the colonists left, local Africans had hoped to recover their lands, but that recovery was not to be. Now additional lands are being taken over for the park with no more regard for local feelings than existed during colonial times. “As a local villager whose family farm was partly taken over by the park expressed bitterly, ‘Do you think we have independence [*uburu*]? Isn’t this like colonialism [*kama ukolini*]?’” (194).

Ordinary Africans’ experience of the management of Arusha National Park, as Neumann explicitly characterizes it, amounts to “the new colonialism” (194). Tanzanian park authorities and others in the Tanzanian government justify the park as a boost to tourism and thus as a source of large revenues generated for the support of state institutions at the national level. The tourists are attracted in part because of beliefs they have about the history and purposes of the national parks of Tanzania, however fictional the basis for those beliefs may be. Such beliefs also benefit international environmental organizations for revenue-raising purposes and serve to legitimize the neo-colonial practices of the current Tanzanian park authorities. In terms similar to those employed by other recent scholars, Neumann describes the situation as follows:

The European settlers are now gone. Significant portions of their former estates lie not in the hands of [indigenous] Meru farmers, but behind the boundaries of the national park. The land has taken on new meanings derived from European representations of Africa. . . . The late poet and

author Evelyn Ames was much taken by Arusha National Park, describing her experience there as . . . like being “alone in Eden.” In her account of leaving the park we can hear many of the themes of nature that African national parks were meant to embody for Europeans: the park is primordial, undisturbed, unchanging, and pure in the absence of humans. . . . The representation of Arusha as a prehuman remnant providing refuge from society is also developed in another popular depiction, where the park provides “a sense of complete withdrawal from the world of man and of immersion in the peace of unspoiled nature.”

Tanzania’s independent government has accepted the national park model based on these Western ideals of pristine nature. Arusha National Park remains principally an attraction for tourists to experience “primeval Africa.” (177)

Neumann recognizes that the allusions to Eden are more than a metaphor. Western conservation efforts in Africa are infused with a missionary spirit; at the famous Arusha conference in 1961, “conservationists were encouraged to ‘work among the masses with missionary zeal’ and ‘to awaken African public opinion to the economic and cultural values of their unique heritage of wildlife’” (141). It is easy to see in such efforts “striking parallels with the efforts of early Christian missionaries, particularly their ideas about Africans as ‘natural Christians.’ Likewise it appears that Africans were [now] regarded as ‘natural conservationists’” (141). The Christian religion, unlike many other faiths, has always assumed that its values are universal, in the end meant to spread across the entire world.

As related in Genesis, God created the world. To see nature unaltered by human hand, to enter into nature “undisturbed” and “unspoiled,” is to encounter a direct product of the divine handiwork. God is not literally in nature—such a supposition would be the heresy of pantheism—but the experience of “original nature” comes close to putting a person in the very presence of God. The tourists who flock today to Africa’s national parks are a modern version of the pilgrims who have long flooded Rome or descended on Lourdes in southern France. As the visitors to “original nature” in Africa have received spiritual nourishment and replenishment, accommodating their needs has proved good business for many Africans.

At present, serving the needs of wildlife pilgrims is the most rapidly growing area of the economy of African nations such as Tanzania, which lacks any base of manufacturing or other industry. The Africans need not share the spiritual motive—Neumann comments that “of all the inherited colonial institutions, wildlife conservation was least understood within African culture” (1998, 141)—but they can well appreciate the economic gains that tourism brings.

In some parts of Africa, to be sure, the economic benefits have not been as great, and the motives or capacities of African national governments have been insufficient for the protection of wildlife even in park areas. The bushmeat trade has decimated

wildlife populations over parts of West Africa including the parks. John Oates (1999) argues that the old colonial approach—protected areas with local Africans excluded by direct coercive means—may be the only workable solution to protect the wildlife in such cases. He criticizes environmental leaders for their unwillingness to confront the real world, as they pretend that local “community-based” approaches to conservation can succeed everywhere. Although the themes are now altered, even the community-based style of international environmentalism remains a political crusade to save the world. This newer form of environmental thinking also includes a greater element of guilt about the past. Formal appearances are changed, but the old colonial attitudes are still manifested, and efforts on the ground to protect wildlife or to help the African poor commonly fail. According to Oates, many

international conservation planners [now] stress the need to “empower” local people. This form of paternalism seems to be an entrenched feature of Third World development and humanitarian aid projects, which are typically planned and implemented by highly educated middle-class Westerners. The project planners and managers generally maintain (or improve) their own lifestyles, while displaying attitudes that seem to be colored both by colonial-style paternalism toward people they regard as the benighted peasants of the Third World, and by guilt for the perceived wrongdoing of their colonial antecedents. This pursuit of a mixture of material and socio-political aims has become endemic in Third World conservation projects initiated by Westerners and, as I have argued, has its roots in the liaison that developed in the 1970s between international conservation and development organizations. (1999, 234)

## Conclusion

The national parks of Tanzania and other African countries have today become grist for the scriptwriters of environmental fantasies. A cynic might say that this “Disneyland management” of Africa’s park areas is their actual highest and best use. Fantasy sells, and millions of people in Europe and the United States, living in London, New York, and other urban centers, enjoy images of the Garden of Eden, whether in Africa or elsewhere in the world. By contrast, the rural people in these areas who are directly affected by the setting aside of surrounding park lands constitute a small and less-moneyed minority that has less political influence both with their own national governments and in international arenas.

Yet a critical problem with the use of rural Africa as a playland for romantic fantasies is the potential for contrary images to arise. Many religious prophets have lost their following by specifying an actual date for the end of the world. When Hollywood filmed the life of John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind*, it took large dramatic license. That portrayal was acceptable for a movie, but no such license is granted the scriptwriters for Africa’s national parks. If the current Hollywood imagery and man-

agement practices are exposed as such, the viewer pleasures will be greatly diminished. Large European and American commitments of funds—and other large costs borne by the local people who live in close proximity to the African park areas—will have gone for naught. Rather than moral heroes, many American and European environmentalists may come to be seen as the Elmer Gantry of our time.

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