

Looking beyond the past to give African wildlife a future: A critical review of *The Big Conservation Lie*

Tarik Bodasing

About the author

Tarik is a landscape ecologist and naturalist who has spent most of his adult life working in African wildlife conservation.

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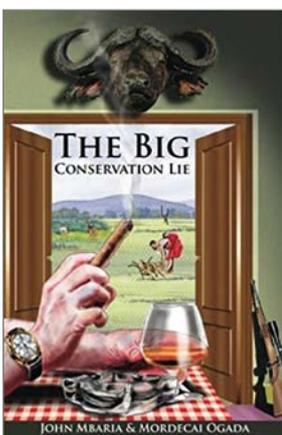
About the book

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It has been said that Africa is only for the brave. Much of the continent is overwhelmed by conflict and political instability. Systemic problems such as overpopulation, mass unemployment, corrupt governance and low investment in healthcare and education are ever present. It is a demanding and frustrating environment to work in. The conservation sector faces significant challenges from population growth, development, wildlife crime and climate change – not to mention problems internal to the sector, including gross mismanagement, egoism and unethical practice.

The Big Conservation Lie is a critical examination of the state of Kenyan conservation from the viewpoints of two nationals embedded in the system (a journalist and an ecologist). They attempt to tackle several complex issues, and tend to base their arguments around racial lines – ironic, given the ethnicity of many officials and executives who are overseeing conservation crises in Africa. The authors condemn several large organizations and prominent figures, and lambast the Kenyan government, using examples of ‘bad white people’ to justify their argument. Their slating of religion, environmentalists, hunters and pharmaceutical companies, though at times justified, is only loosely connected to the main theme of the book and is disappointingly littered with racial overtones. Equally concerning is that the authors appear to be dismissive of the fact that Africa is in the midst of a major biodiversity crisis.

To their credit, the authors highlight key issues with many foreign conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Africa. The exploitative nature of fund-raising, the failure to translate funds

into effective action, and the absence of collaboration are all valid concerns. However, the book ignores the intricacies of the African conservation landscape, and tends to focus on criticism rather than solutions. The discussion of traditional values is badly lacking in context; so too the section on the economic value of wildlife, which begins well, but fades into a racial rant. There appears to be a bias towards the needs and rights of people, rather than those of ecosystems. One realizes that the argument is not people *and* wildlife, but people *over* wildlife. Their denunciation of the protectionist ‘Western’ approach is not backed by any tangible evidence of why this model is inappropriate from a conservation perspective. The book as a whole thus has a distinctly anthropocentric feel, and fails to adequately support the plethora of incendiary remarks made about racism and colonialism in the context of conservation.

In what follows, I will discuss a few of the fundamental problems with African conservation from an ecocentric perspective. My views are based on my experiences as an ecologist, within the protectionist and the communal conservancy frameworks. I believe that these fundamental problems are largely an outcome of a rigid, anthropocentric approach to managing dynamic ecological systems. This approach inevitably leads to poor decision-making and the squandering of funds on inappropriate strategies. Surprisingly, a number of state departments and NGOs play an active role in this, but I will highlight several instances where collaboration and adaptation have benefited both people and wildlife.

White versus black

The authors of *The Big Conservation Lie* regularly play the race card, but fail to pay attention to two significant developments in African history that have profoundly altered traditional ways of life independently of colonization and white supremacy. Firstly, population has increased dramatically, exerting immense pressure on the landscape and ecosystems. Secondly, a concurrent change from a more sustainable existence to a high-resource-consumption lifestyle has occurred. These factors are currently not considered in conservation planning.

Many African communities now reside in burgeoning sedentary settlements, keep large herds and subsist on a predominantly meat-based diet. Trade and monetary profit have become more important than subsistence. This has led to demand on resources outstripping supply, with devastating consequences for wildlife and broader ecosystems.

The authors' claims that large-scale hunting was unknown before the arrival of 'the white man' are not supported by the evidence – consider the history of King Shaka Zulu's hunting pits, or the mass slaughter of game (and people) that accompanied the Bantu expansion (Manyanga and Paneti, 2017). What is more, numerous African communities have participated in commercial trade in bush-meat and livestock for centuries. In other words, the devastation of Africa's wildlife from hunting has little to do with colonization, but is the inevitable result when populations grow beyond the ability of the land to sustain them. Indeed, there are several examples of former colonies where wildlife is thriving – South Africa and Namibia for example. The approaches taken by these countries shows evidence of the success of adaptive management, and despite ongoing challenges, they should serve as beacons for the continent.

Conserving traditional values

The Big Conservation Lie argues that, unlike the anthropocentrism of 'Western' values, African traditional values are more

ecocentric. There is some truth to this, but the authors' discussion lacks adequate nuance and context. There is no doubt that many African traditions are indeed based on a 'nature first' philosophy, as the authors briefly discuss. These values *should* be preserved; through them may lie a key to rediscovering our connection with nature. Unfortunately, there are other traditional values that are not harmonious with wildlife conservation. For example, many African beliefs centre on the use of animal parts as ceremonial wear, or as a means to endow one with magical powers. This has led to an intensive commercialized trade (vulture heads and leopard skins are well-known examples) that has caused local extinctions of certain species (Ogada *et al.*, 2016). These values *should definitely not* be preserved; after all, we no longer allow women to be burned at the stake for suspected witchcraft (a similarly barbaric but 'traditional' practice). The authors' failure to discuss harmful traditional practices (as evidenced by the illegal trade in animal parts) is startling to say the least. It also somewhat invalidates their suggestion that Africans treat wildlife as possessing intrinsic value, and that therefore conservation is better supported as part of a traditional belief structure.

Problems with the 'Western' model of conservation?

In the strongest parts of the book, the authors highlight fundamental flaws with the managerial approach of certain NGOs. The unfortunate truth is that some NGOs are managed by egoism and fame, rather than being focused on tangible results. This is exacerbated by the use of outdated concepts and a failure to set realistic or measurable targets. These organizations suffer from a lack of dynamism, high staff turnover, and, inevitably, a lack of trust from project partners. It is an anthropocentric approach and is not uncommon in the single-species conservation arena.

Single-species NGOs are the norm in many developing countries, and securing donor funding is definitely more likely when charismatic species are involved. Few

“Numerous African communities have participated in commercial trade in bush-meat and livestock for centuries.”



A lappet-faced vulture, one of several endangered vulture species in Africa, which has been decimated by poisoning. The picture was taken at Mkhuze Game Reserve in Zululand, South Africa, by A Botha.

are willing to open their wallets for “Save ecosystem and landscape connectivity” but many will do so for “Save the Tiger” or “Space for Giants”. The authors’ castigation of the failings of such NGOs is understandable, given the large proportion of donor funds that they absorb. However, the discussion is too one-sided, and

fails to look at successful approaches to conservation.

The key here is to understand how funding is used to influence conservation efforts, and whether there is effective collaboration with local organizations and communities. Unfortunately, it is true that many NGOs are unable to provide clear answers to questions about these matters. However, outcomes-based conservation is a simple solution to this problem, allowing potential donors to follow projects in real-time and base their decisions on real achievement. There are also alternatives to single-species models; for instance, the creation of holistic landscape-scale projects where funds are shared with community members who are involved in the initiative. Good examples include the Lion Custodian programme in Kenya, and several well-managed communal conservancies in Namibia and Botswana.

Despite the problems, many NGOs have achieved incredible successes. Single species can act as surrogates for increasing awareness and action around broader issues (Caro, 2010). For example, the Virunga Mountains landscape in Central Africa has been officially protected and promoted, thanks to NGO action to protect the mountain gorilla (African Wildlife Foundation, 2018). The Desert Rhino (<http://www.savetherhinotrust.org/>) and Desert Lion (<https://www.desertlion.info/>) organizations in Namibia have achieved positive results in directing funding streams to solving human-wildlife conflict and conserving these species. Panthera has successfully pioneered a project – ‘Furs for Life’ – to replace real leopard skins with synthetic alternatives for use in traditional ceremonies (<https://www.panthera.org/furs-for-life>) to help combat illegal killing of leopards. These are examples of projects that are at the cutting edge of using donor funds to produce measurable conservation efforts.

That we are currently in the midst of an ecological crisis cannot be disputed. Available evidence on population trends, illegal wildlife trade and loss of habitat indicates a global collapse in biodiversity

(e.g. Barlow *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, all projected human population growth curves in Africa point to rapid increases (Bish, 2016). At the end of the day, it is irrelevant if flowery language is used to illicit sympathy, or if single species are used to garner support for a cause. What matters is that the conservation sector is in dire need of revenue and action in a world increasingly focused on human requirements.

The value of wildlife in Africa

The authors' statements concerning the value that African communities place on wildlife come across as virtuous, until one examines the evidence (the IUCN Red List, State of Biodiversity reports, TRAFFIC bulletins, scientific literature *etc.*). Wildlife is consumed as food, killed as a threat or traded as a resource (see 'Conserving traditional values' above). It is a perspective that invariably treats wildlife as a commodity rather than as possessing value in itself. The authors refer to successful examples of people and wildlife co-existing in conservancies, but neglect to mention that this is almost exclusively in regions of very low population density (Botswana, according to World Bank Data – <https://data.worldbank.org> – has 4 people per km²; Namibia has 3 people per km²). Even in these systems, human–wildlife conflict, poaching and land degradation are still substantial challenges. By comparison, South Africa (with 47 people per km²) has problems with people encroaching on protected areas leading to large-scale poaching and, in some cases, the ceding of formerly protected land to communities. The authors' home country, Kenya, supports 87 people per km², so I find the lack of consideration of human population density in *The Big Conservation Lie* somewhat bemusing.

Conservation and capitalism

The impacts of foreign conglomerates on Africa's landscape represent a significant challenge. The despoiling of sites of cultural and ecological significance, in

particular, points to a problem in the fabric of society. It is driven by corporate and state greed, but is also linked to the very real problems faced by developing economies. Until income parity is reached, African governments will continue to court foreign investors and tourists with big dollars. Ideally, African governments should be subsidizing local companies and enforcing legislation to protect the landscape. It is up to the governments of Africa to put people and nature before greed, and, unfortunately, this is something that African leaders seem incapable of.

Ultimately, there is no silver bullet for solving Africa's conservation challenges. Each situation is unique, and our approach needs to be adaptable. Africa does, however, need a mind shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric solutions. What Africa does not need is more people blaming its colonial history; this indicates an inability to accept responsibility for solving the problem. If – as in *The Big Conservation Lie* – attitudes remain focused on 'the sins of the past' the continent will remain a broken husk. However, if we can accept the past for what it was, and develop and implement real solutions for the future, there is huge potential to conserve the cultural and natural diversity of this incredible continent. ■

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