An East African Regional Trust Fund for Conservation?
What Will They Think Of Next?

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A recent workshop in Kenya discussed at length the feasibility of establishing an East Africa Regional Trust Fund to support biodiversity conservation. The Trust Fund would be contributed to by donors, governments, philanthropists and even the private sector, and the income would be used primarily to meet revenue shortfalls in the Protected Areas.

The rationale for the Trust Fund is the assumption that while the costs of conservation are rising inexorably the revenues from conservation are becoming ever more variable and unreliable. As a result, conservation in general, and "core conservation activities" in particular, are often starved of resources to the detriment of wildlife and biodiversity. Furthermore, the reliance of the protected areas on tourism for their main source of revenues renders them highly vulnerable to periods of global or local instability. Indeed, a doomsday scenario is conjured up of a world riven by wars and terrorism, in which global tourism collapses, revenues vanish, and protected areas are encroached and overrun with a permanent loss of wildlife estate and biodiversity.

No one would disagree that the world is a very different place post nine-eleven, and it is true that the tourism sector, among others, has taken a massive blow. Nonetheless, on closer inspection these assumptions and scenarios are seen to be more apparent than real, and to be almost in the realm of scare-mongering. What they do remind us, however, is that to survive in such times of uncertainty and change an organisation must be well managed and flexible and able to respond positively and quickly to the new conditions. In contrast, those that are badly managed, inflexible and unable to change go to the wall, usually complaining to anyone who will listen that "it isn't our fault". So southern Africa where tourism, and especially wildlife based tourism, is highly diversified has been less affected than has eastern Africa where tourism is less diversified and where wildlife tourism in particular remains almost in the dark ages.

Indeed, most observers would agree that in general conservation in eastern Africa is not starved of funds and that any apparent lack of resources is symptomatic of three closely related failures. First, an institutional failure, in the form of vast and self perpetuating conservation bureaucracies, characterised by deeply embedded inefficiencies and unwillingness to accept or effect change; second, a massive policy failure which, by restricting and impeding the potential revenue streams from conservation, creates perverse incentives for landowners to get rid of wildlife; and third, a complete failure of management capabilities, specifically to diversify revenue streams from within the protected areas themselves.

A regional Trust Fund, as proposed here, is no more than a thinly veiled plea for increased subsidies to state monopolies, only in this instance to state conservation monopolies rather than, say, to state airline monopolies. All state monopolies are inefficient, effortlessly consuming resources while delivering few benefits, and state conservation monopolies are no different in this respect. Such subsidies will simply perpetuate and entrench inefficiencies within the state conservation sectors and make it even less likely that they address the root problems of failed policies and poor management. Furthermore, such subsidies will create perverse incentives against efficiency. A park manager, or a state conservation CEO, knowing that shortfalls will be made up, will have no incentives to become more efficient and may even be encouraged to create larger shortfalls to attract even more funding.

It is a curious fact that among the last of the state monopolies to survive in Africa are the state conservation monopolies – the rest have been killed off by structural adjustment programmes at their ilk. And it is the sad fact that the precarious condition of biodiversity and wildlife conservation in eastern Africa is the direct consequence of hopelessly inefficient and bloated state conservation monopolies aided and abetted by international conservation organisations who, with their seemingly limitless resources, lack of accountability and hidden agendas wield such power and influence over conservation policy. Together they have created an unholy alliance that perpetuates on the one hand inefficiency and misuse of conservation resources, and on the other a perverse policy environment that creates disincentives to invest in conservation. These entire rotten and unhealthy edifices must be swept away, not perpetuated through a regional Trust Fund.

Kenya affords a prime example of the sheer scale of the inefficiency of these state conservation monopolies. Over the last 25 years, the Kenya state conservation monopoly in its various guises (first the Wildlife Conservation and Management

Department, and now the Kenya Wildlife Service) has received literally tens of millions of dollars in subsidies, revenues, grants and gifts. In the same period the wildlife which they were charged to conserve and protect has decreased by 50%. Very recently, the sheer impotence of the KWS to manage wildlife has been demonstrated by the spearing to death of most, if not all, of the remaining lions from Nairobi National Park literally within sight of their headquarters where some 500 bureaucrats sat paralysed at their desks. Only a state monopoly could hope to attain such breathtaking heights of sheer incompetence and mismanagement – and get away with it – and only a state monopoly would then have the gall to out and ask for even more money.

Noticeable by its absence at this recent workshop was any sense of failure among the state conservationists; any hint of recognition that maybe they were pursuing ineffective policies (or was it their hidden agenda to eradicate 50% of all wildlife); any sense that they should even discuss, let alone implement, new policies; any sense that before trotting out yet another begging bowl they should perhaps first put their own house in order and improve efficiency, cut costs and mismanagement, and diversify revenue flows; or any sense of a need to change.

Donors, governments and the private sector on the whole show little interest in funding subsidies to state monopolies so it may not prove that easy to raise significant funds – in the recent past even Swiss Air and Sabena were allowed to go bankrupt. Clearly, a completely new approach is required – one designed to create incentives within the state conservation sector; not simply to reduce costs, or to make better use of existing resources or to increase revenues and turnover, important as these are, but specifically to embrace a new mindset and manage all aspects of the conservation of biodiversity more efficiently so that the resource under their tutelage flourishes rather than wastes and withers away. Such an approach might more easily attract donor interest and funds, and a Trust Fund to assist, direct and fund such change might even have a beneficial rather than a perversely negative impact on the state of conservation.

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