

Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Organizational Overview: Central Africa Programs

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ABSTRACT

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has a diverse program in the central Africa region that emphasizes both science and its conservation application. The goal of WCS programs is specifically wildlife conservation and the conservation of wild areas. The application of this goal necessarily involves WCS in a range of social and economic issues. We seek the development of partnerships, at local and national levels, with others who share our goal. Although consensus-seeking is often stated as an objective, it is difficult to realize in the heterogeneous societies of central Africa. We measure our success and gear our activities specifically toward the conservation of wild resources. WCS focuses first on the most biologically rich areas and approaches its goal with a "bottom-up" adaptive approach based on empirical evidence and backed by theoretical principles. WCS maintains an information-based, scientifically-driven strategy called by this volume the Conservation Science Project, or CSP. The CSP approach works toward its goal of conservation by applying and adapting conservation strategies to local realities. Biological monitoring systems are established to continuously review whether flora and fauna are being effectively conserved. WCS recognizes that other agencies working in the region have different agendas; it is important that we share information in order to work toward developing complementary approaches in our activities.

INTRODUCTION

In order for field conservation to succeed, a variety of approaches, efforts, and actions are required. The purpose of this section is to discuss some of the approaches taken by various actors in the trinational region of CAR, Cameroon, and Congo. Because I have worked with the Wildlife Conservation Society for many years, I could present the goals and activities of our program in the region. Instead, I would like to describe some strategic principles that characterize the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) operations across the continent, and then suggest a few issues for discussion.

WCS, based at the Bronx Zoo in New York City, is somewhat of a "little sister" in the family of conservation NGOs working out in the field, but we actually have a strong program in Africa, particularly in central Africa. The way we conduct our work varies significantly according to the degree of emphasis on science done vs. conservation applications implemented. We work in pristine, almost intact ecosystems, as well as those that have been altered substantially by human use. At times we conduct short-term analyses of one to two years, but most of the time our field programs are strategic commitments for many years at a given site. The diversity of our program suggests some principles that I think are important for how we try to work as an institution, and some issues that are more particularly important to the way we look at integrated conservation and development programs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEARLY DEFINED GOALS

Many conservation projects implementing integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) are struggling with the basic question, "What are our goals?" It sounds simple. Institutions state their goals; projects state their goals. But when you get into the realm of integrated conservation and development, you are already talking about two goals: one is conservation and one is development. Although many programs try to achieve both simultaneously, and in many cases some success is certainly possible, these two goals are not always compatible. At times, tremendous conflict arises, making it very difficult for a project to operate under such circumstances.

In our own programs at WCS, we recognize that we can address only a defined portion of the problems that exist in central Africa. Our goal is wildlife conservation and the conservation of wild areas. Recognizing this single, overarching goal helps us to bring a focus to our work. The goal of working for wildlife and wild areas gives us direction, leads us to results-oriented strategies, and ultimately helps us to be effective. This is a long term goal. Despite the offerings of large donor agencies for integrated work, even rural development under the guise of biological conservation, we are trying to maintain our goal as a single, highest priority that we can approach in an effective, strategic fashion.

This may sound like a narrow approach. However, we are not traditional "wildlifers" or purely "protectionist." Although our goal is single in focus, our approach actually deals with many issues besides biology, and in addition to wildlife. In the application of our programs, therefore, we enter into many fields that are crucially important, as we look at real-world, complex ecological, political and social systems that are the context for our work. However, our strategies, our plans, and our activities are undertaken to address—and we measure our success by—the goal of wildlife and wilderness conservation.

When one considers the context in which we are working in central Africa, it is clear that the goal is not shared by all players in the region. As we work toward the goal of wildlife conservation, then, it is important to consider that our goal of conservation should not be imposed on a situation. It is strategically important, therefore, at the outset of any of our programs, to recognize the degree to which our goal is shared by others. We find that recognition of the importance of wildlife and wilderness is more frequently present at a national level than at a local level. However, we should not overlook people's attitudes towards wildlife and wilderness on a local level. We have in fact found strong partners at all levels, particularly where more information is provided and longer-term perspectives are considered. In such situations, therefore, it is im-

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portant for us to identify what national mandate exists for wildlife conservation, who local partners might be, and what values they attribute to wild areas and wildlife. These values can be economic—they most frequently are. They can also be cultural or aesthetic. They can have to do with pride in natural heritage. We work very closely with people on a number of fronts to identify commonalities in values. WCS believes it is essential right from the beginning, and throughout our programs, to orient the program toward conservation of wildlife and wild areas so that the steps taken can be effective in the longer run.

Some papers in this volume speak about social consensus. Its achievement is not easy. The communities we are dealing with are not homogeneous. People are not going to unanimously rise up saying, "This is what we want." This lack of consensus is a reality even if the question is joining the logging company or having a road built, developments that are often strongly welcomed. Consensus is even more conspicuously elusive when one is talking about wildlife conservation, which leads us through many difficult processes and challenges.

As we go about our conservation business, conduct research, develop management systems, help to develop revenue sources, and as we work with people, all WCS project activities are geared toward, and measured by, what impact these efforts will have on conservation. When we enter into ICDPs, therefore, we do not necessarily assume that the project must improve household income or the well-being of people. In our work of conservation, we often can assist in these ways. In fact we normally do. Better management of protected areas or more environmentally-sound natural resource use usually yields new employment or the employment of social groups that were often previously disadvantaged. Socioeconomic improvements are frequently important ties to wildlife conservation. However, there are many situations where the ties are ambiguous at best, and potentially destructive at worst.

Take the situation where a community bordering a protected area requests that the conservation project build a school. If seen as a direct benefit of good conservation practice by the community (zoning land use, stopping illegal hunting, etc.), the addition of a community school may be an effective conservation tool. However, it may be that wildlife hunting is not controlled, that the school will attract another several hundred people to the region, and that far greater pressure will be exerted on a dwindling, endangered community of wildlife. If community activities are not compatible with our goals, our field projects are not going to undertake or facilitate them. Such activities may be compatible with a development project's goals, or those of the national or local government.



Orycteropus afer (Illustration: Bernardin Nabana)

There are a lot of donor dollars devoted to rural development, infrastructure development, and agriculture. This investment is appropriate and desirable in many places and at many times. But where biological conservation is recognized as the goal, our programs will remain focused on achieving this result.

ATTENTION TO PLACE

WCS programs are field-based. Some observers have called us "the muddy-boots organization." In being field-based, we identify real-world problems in conservation, design programs to address them, and by so doing work to demonstrate success. This is a bottom-up approach in many ways. We work as practitioners, and our practice has many approaches. Much of our work is empirical, although based on knowledge of conservation, development, biological, and ecological theories. Our question as we apply this knowledge to real systems is: Can we make our theories work on a practical basis?

Regarding place, WCS usually focuses first on the biologically richest, almost pristine areas. Consequently, we most often emphasize improving conservation in protected areas or creating new reserves where that is appropriate. But our programs almost always run into the issues of industrial, commercial, or subsistence use of resources. By working on the ground, our programs are able to identify what the real problems are, what issues are most important, and where actual conflicts remain. Direct examination and work in the field helps us build conservation systems that address real world situations while also informing analytical or theoretical discussions.

Our pragmatic approach allows us to deal with site specificity. Attention to the specifics of not just the biology of the animals or the forest in which one is working, but, as importantly, with the specifics of the socioeconomic context is absolutely essential for success. People's attitudes and use of resources, as well as the different economic forces being brought to bear on their lives, vary greatly from one place to another and must be taken into account to achieve progress in conservation.

Take, for example, the trinational Sangha region, the focus of this volume. We have contiguous but quite different areas and situations. High population pressures and commercial logging characterize the Dzanga-Sangha Reserve. The Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park, just across the border, is basically the same forest, but population pressure is low. The context that then determines our approach and activities in Nouabalé-Ndoki is based on concerns about future industrial logging rather than unsustainable subsistence uses of the forest. The Lobéké area is a mixture of the two, with significant local

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populations and commercial operators. In this case, local communities are most concerned with resource use rights on lands that are separate from priority conservation lands and are therefore willing to be in partnership with conservation strategies in limiting outside commercial forest exploitation.

Flexibility and specificity are important both in informing the theories of conservation and in effecting results. The demonstration of results also has a tremendous effect on policy and practice at higher levels. In the trination region, conservation systems are beginning to work and are getting the attention of national governments. In turn, these successes are affecting how governments perceive conservation. Thus, efforts in this region are beginning to have multiplier effects as we all learn from their examples.

INFORMATION-BASED, SCIENTIFICALLY-DRIVEN STRATEGIES

WCS strategies and activities begin with improving knowledge of the biological, ecological, and/or socioeconomic systems that are relevant to significant conservation issues. This fundamental principle is kept in sight throughout our programs. It is extremely important that field conservationists work with open minds, and are diagnostic in the way they look at situations. This approach lays the groundwork for appropriate, adaptive approaches to real problems on the ground. Whether it is in identifying places that are important, species that are endangered, threats to wildlife or wild areas, impacts of resource use systems, or people's attitudes and values, we should enter into our work with open minds. By looking carefully, collecting information, and thinking critically throughout conservation programs, we will build an information base that helps to direct effective strategies.

Included in that information base should be a thorough understanding of biological and socioeconomic systems. Little is known about the status of much of the forest of central Africa, its resident species, and the basic requirements for health of the ecosystem. Similarly, little is known about local communities in the region and the operation of their governments. Nor are the attitudes of individuals well-understood, except in a few areas where studies have been conducted. The politics of communities, the power relationships among various actors, and the roles of income, education, infrastructure, and history in determining conservation policies and practices require more study. Only through a better understanding of some of the fundamentals will we be able to conserve central African forests.

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Throughout this process, continued collection of information and self-assessments are extremely important. We should be frequently asking ourselves, "Are we taking steps that are getting us where we want to go?" This reflection encourages appropriate solutions to some of the problems we may see, and promotes following up on great opportunities that arise. Again, these problems and possibilities are not the same across regions, and across borders; close examination of actual situations is important.

Too many wildlife conservation projects never really look at what is happening to wildlife. We must set up and maintain biological and social monitoring systems. Without information and a good scientific approach, we are left with good intentions and perhaps some progress. Yet if we assess progress in an objective fashion, measure our results in terms of gains for wildlife and wilderness, then we can consequently adapt our programs to be more effective. Without this information, we cannot conclude that our work has produced desired results, nor should we then promote our unproven strategies.

Many other principles could be cited, but the integration of the factors mentioned is never easy. As I think about the presentations in this volume, it sounds as if conservation efforts are deliberative, coordinated, and successful. We ought to be in good shape. We are all working together. We share similar goals and ideas. But in fact, we still have many problems. There are tremendous conflicts. In many areas we are not succeeding. We are busy doing conservation, but we are far from achieving our goals, no matter what we say about our successes. The challenges we are facing get back to some of the complexities of the systems with which we are dealing, complexity regarding biological systems, social systems, and local versus national versus international interests. We are working against large economic forces that are not in our control. Sometimes we are at odds with many forces, including each other.

These dilemmas are important to discuss further, acknowledging that our goals and agendas are sometimes disparate. The more we can share information and be open about what our objectives are, the greater the likelihood that we can all succeed. If we can recognize these differences, and reconcile them to find complementary approaches to our work, if not collaborative ones, then we may move towards actually helping each other to succeed in conservation in this truly important area of the world.

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