

THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN UNDERSTANDING CURRENT SOUTH AFRICAN ATTITUDES TO CONSERVATION

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'To be open to the past is, simply, to be open to the roots of what we are. The past is contrast and perspective for the present' (Harris 1978, p. 124)

Most environmentalists would agree that the ultimate objective of environmental education is to develop people who are environmentally literate. In order to achieve this end, the concept of environmental education has broadened considerably in recent years to encompass a diversity of disciplines which deal with people-environment relationships (Irwin 1990, p. 5). A vital aspect of this broad-based concept of environmental education is the adoption of an issue-based, problem solving approach, in a manner which encourages students to become critical thinkers capable of independent analysis of a problem right through to appropriate social action (Knamiller 1983). W'Okotuma and Wereko-Brobby (1985) have also pointed out the importance of the human dimension of environmental concern, stressing the need to include the sociocultural element, when considering environmental issues.

The emphasis placed on local involvement, participatory decision-making and socially responsive action by the authors mentioned above, as well as others such as Briceno and Pitt (1988), are of great relevance to South Africa in the development of potential strategies to overcome the generally low levels of environmental awareness which have been noted by several surveys (Gear 1988).

The findings of Huckle (1986), who used the Australian colonial and class context (a context in some ways similar to that of South Africa), are also of special significance. In an article on strategies to achieve environmental citizenship, Huckle places a 'sense of history' (1986, p. 15) second only to a knowledge of the natural environment. Huckle regards a sense of history as a crucial aspect of the people-environment dynamic, since it is this aspect which permits a proper understanding of the impact of white settlement both on the environment, as well as on the natural economies of the indigenous peoples. By drawing attention to such factors as land losses sustained by the indigenous people and the destruction of their interrelatedness with the environment, Huckle implies that a country's history is an integral part of present day environmental response and that a study of the past should therefore form an important part of achieving environmental literacy. Similarly, Redclift maintains that, because the environments of developing countries 'bear the imprint of colonial history' (1987, p. 83), current studies of environmental problems are inextricable from the land struggles and conflict over natural resources which have taken place in the past.

There is a growing trend among environmentalists to take the past into account when analysing the environmental problems of settler societies in Africa and Australia (Anderson and Grove 1987, Huntley 1976, McMichael and Gare 1984, Vail 1977). In similar vein, when addressing the problem of negative environmental response among blacks, the South African environmental movement could greatly benefit from an increased awareness of environmental history. In this regard, the well balanced precolonial land ethic of such groups as the San, the Khoi and the Nguni needs to be recognized. Then one needs to identify the historico-political factors which negatively impacted on these natural economies. This could throw much light on the current alienation of blacks from environmental issues (Khan 1990b).

One crucial aspect of history with particular relevance for the environment, is the body of discriminatory land legislation, of which the Native Land Act of 1913 is the most important. This act completed the process of the physical and emotional estrangement of Africans by making it illegal for Africans to own land in designated white areas, except in the Cape (Letsoalo 1987). Other racially discriminatory measures which have been promulgated under the apartheid system are major contributory factors in the formation of distorted environmental attitudes among blacks (Khan 1989). Under the apartheid system, the attainment of conservation objectives has often been secondary to the political priority of establishing a society based on white privilege and power. Hence, one of the unforeseen consequences of the apartheid system, has been the increasing indifference and antagonism toward environmental issues manifested by the communities alienated by that system.

Clearly, in interpreting and understanding the polarized nature of current environmental response, an historical perspective is indispensable. However, despite the growing number of studies in the field of South African environmental history, the focus thus far has been on a Eurocentric and romanticized interpretation of the past (Carruthers 1988). Not only has this approach neglected to place environmental history within a socioeconomic and political context, but it has disregarded the role played by blacks (Carruthers 1989). This is not surprising since, given the subordinate position within society historically occupied by blacks and the association of white privilege and power within the developing conservation ideology, it has proved easy to present a distorted picture of blacks as environmentally destructive. An elitist perspective

combined with a negative perception of blacks in relation to the environment has, to a large extent, survived to be incorporated into the existing conservation ideology (Khan 1990a). The limitations of this legacy from the past, are still deciding the parameters of environmental considerations today - once more underlining the necessity for an historical perspective.

The historical depiction of blacks as environmentally destructive, has been fueled by the often hostile black response to conservationist intervention by the state, particularly in the 'homelands' during the 1930s-1950s. The Betterment Programme, a state attempt to 'combat erosion [and] conserve the environment' (de Wet 1989, p. 326), came in for especially bitter resistance in black rural areas. This sometimes resulted in violence and death, as happened in the Northern Transvaal, Witziesshoek and the Transkei (de Wet 1989). Once again, these actions can only be correctly interpreted if viewed within their historical context. Blaikie has pointed out that soil conservation measures in Africa have usually been applied within the limitations of the 'colonial model' (1987, p. 4) of soil conservation. According to this model, the problem of soil erosion is seen primarily as an environmental one and is consequently divorced from the social, economic and political factors which contributed to the original problem.

The South African experience has been very similar, with the imposition of fiercely resented conservation measures such as fencing, stock culling and even the forced removal of entire communities (Beinart 1989, Platzky and Walker 1985). However, as the anger aroused by this type of state action has indicated, the use of conservation rhetoric as a justification for intervention in black peasant agriculture did not mask the fact that these measures were imposed on powerless communities with no access to decision-making structures (Beinart 1984). These measures were applied on a racially discriminatory basis, without consultation and often did not achieve their conservationist aims, leaving communities even worse off than before (de Wet 1989). Consequently these conservation measures were seen as measures of political control and as attempts to curb the prosperity of black peasants. Further, Betterment Planning, in its effort to control land usage and its use of forced removals, was regarded as an integral part of the government's bantustan scheme in the wider system of apartheid (Platzky and Walker 1985). As a result of a long history of state-imposed conservation which often resulted in hardship, blacks, especially in the rural areas, today remain suspicious of conservation in general and of state sponsored conservation efforts in particular.

Given the elitist characteristics and racial bias of the emerging game protectionist movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, blacks played no part in it. However, while it would be true to say that most blacks were alienated from conservation issues as

defined by whites, relevant environmental issues, such as those revolving around the land question, agriculture and soil erosion, received a positive response. It is the history of organizations like the Native Farmers' Association, up to now ignored by the mainstream environmental movement, which needs to be studied if we are to benefit from the lessons of the past.

The Native Farmers' Association (NFA), was established in 1917 in the Eastern Cape by the young Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu and the Rev J.E East, a black American missionary (Khan 1990a, Ch 3). Jabavu, recently returned from studying in America, had been deeply impressed by the agricultural training techniques of Booker T. Washington of the renowned Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Both Jabavu and East were committed conservationists and were determined to address the widespread environmental degradation and poverty among the rural communities of the Eastern Cape. Through their efforts, the first truly environmental organization was established in South Africa. The NFA was a community-based, participatory environmental organization, with an holistic perspective. It acted as a political pressure group, undertook socioeconomic upgrading projects, taught conservation farming techniques among the poor and illiterate and disseminated relevant literature.

That the scope of the organization extended beyond the narrow protectionism of the contemporary wildlife conservation movement was amply demonstrated by its intervention on behalf of the Fingo tribe in the Keiskamma Hoek area. The government attempted to justify the forced removal of this group by erroneously claiming pollution of the sponge sources of the Tyumie river, due to cattle overstocking. This attempt was vehemently criticized by the NFA. However, given the wider context of black political inequality and powerlessness, the NFA's efforts in this instance, as well as in many others, were doomed to failure. Although in a limited sense, the NFA was a highly successful organization, in the face of vested white interests and its own political impotence, it was ultimately destined to fail. Nevertheless, a study of its activities, in addition to an evaluation of its historical context, could prove invaluable to environmentalists today.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to demonstrate that the key to many of the problems facing the environmental movement lies in the past and that history, and environmental history in particular, has the potential to illuminate the factors responsible for present day apathy and antagonism. Further, it is hoped that this article will stimulate teachers to use history as a creative tool not only in exploring current environmental issues, but also in determining strategies for the future.