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Back to the Farm Mindfully

Contribution to GTI Forum Solidarity with Animals

Mike Jones

This most interesting discussion about solidarity with animals leads me to remember and reflect on experiences gathered during a life engaged in farming in England and managing wildlife in Africa.

Some History

As a child growing up on a small farm in England during the 1950 and 60s, I had a strong affinity with farm and wild animals. Protecting crops and livestock against predation was part of farm life. Foxes that raided the chicken house or killed newborn lambs led to calls for the local hunt to deal with the problem. Or father reaching for his flashlight and shotgun to enact revenge on the offender. But peering through the cover of bracken to watch a vixen playing with her cubs on an early summer evening was a source of delight and wonder.

At the age of 12, after reading about the rescue of large mammals from the rising waters of a lake created by damming the Zambezi River at Kariba Gorge in Zimbabwe, I decided that I was going to save wild animals in Africa. Ten years later, my first assignment as a new ranger to Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe was to learn how to shoot elephants that were breaking the boundary fence to raid the crops in the fields of neighboring farmers. Pumpkins, maize, bananas, beans, and watermelons are so much tastier than the dry leaves and twigs found in the park.

Having learned a little about how to kill elephants, my next assignment was to work on an extensive program of habitat restoration, the need for which arose from a long-term management aim to increase the numbers of charismatic large mammals for public enjoyment. The park's conservation objective of setting aside wild land for biodiversity conservation conflicted with the objective of creating opportunities for public recreation. The park had to be

seen to make a financial contribution to the national economy, and public support was necessary to legitimize the use of land for wild animal husbandry as opposed to agriculture or mineral extraction.

Unfortunately for all involved, Hwange is mostly dry for a large part of the year.[1] Except where movement was restricted by fences, large numbers of wildlife left the park every dry season as water supplies dwindled. To provide a wildlife spectacle for tourism, many artificial waterholes were created over a period of forty years so that water-dependent species stayed in the park throughout the year. This changed the entire ecology of the park, resulting not only in some animal populations reaching levels that could not be sustained by the available vegetation but also in extensive soil erosion.

Then the culling began to bring the ecosystem back into balance. Large numbers of animals were killed, some were translocated to other places. Nobody was interested in reducing the numbers of animals by slowly reducing the number of artificial waterholes. The animal-loving public and tourist industry protested the culling and provided considerable material support to keep the pumps running in the dry season when the government was short of money. The net outcome is that populations of some species (especially elephants) grew well beyond the point of any sensible population control measures. Habitat degradation and soil loss are increasing, and neighboring small holder farmers face severe livelihood challenges from crop and stock raiding wildlife. Attempts by animal welfare organization to reduce human-elephant conflict with chili pepper and beehives are of limited use.

Elephant numbers in Hwange are at the point where we can expect the kind of population collapse that occurred in Tsavo National Park.[2] Watching elephants die of starvation is most unpleasant, and there is no ethical way out of a dilemma born of the destructive relationship that exists between consumer age people and the rest of nature. Hwange's tourists and wildlife lovers are consuming wildlife and using technology to provide a year-round spectacle that attempts to match what they expect based what they have seen on the TV or at the cinema.

Use of wildlife increased throughout Zimbabwe from the mid-1970s as wildlife-based tourism was promoted as an alternative to livestock ranching. This policy arose out of necessity imposed by the common law of Zimbabwe that has precedence over statutory laws that regulate land use. Under common law, a farmer was entitled to kill any animal that preyed on his livestock or crops. Large wild animals were doomed to extinction outside protected areas because of the conflict between them and people for access to land. Commodification provided a way to significantly increase the amount of land available for wild animals where land unsuited to crop production occurred outside protected areas. One leading conservationist described these wildlife production systems as "rural factories" where additional income is gained by providing tourism services that add financial value in ways that cannot be achieved with livestock ranching.

This short history illustrates how the policies and practices of wildlife management in Zimbabwe were aligned with the evolution of human development and its environmental impacts described by Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin in *The Human Planet and How we Created the Anthropocene*.[3] The accumulation of financial capital and technology have worked together since the fourteenth century to enable the global trade, industrialization, and consumer capitalism that dominate world affairs today. The naïve visions of a 12-year-old boy could never be met while the existing structures that support capitalist exploitation of nature for financial gain exist. Somewhere along the path of our cognitive and cultural evolution from pre-agrarian to post-agrarian societies, humans of the modern world lost the ability to rein in greed and the accumulation of power.

Where Next?

The farm where I grew up has avoided the intensification of industrial agriculture by providing organic grass-fed beef for local markets, tourism and environmental education services, alternative energy production, various trial-and-error experiments in agro-forestry, and the reintroduction of beavers to enhance wildlife and reduce flooding of a neighboring village. These achievements were made against a policy background that favors industrial agriculture and a financial system that requires every expense to be considered in relation to the need to avoid insolvency and the loss of the land to the capitalist system. What is happening on the farm is a movement towards the GTI future of eco-communalism.

Thinking about the misstep in the cultural evolution of modern humans and the need to overcome the idea that humans are exceptional animals leads to consideration of the cosmologies of indigenous people of North America who developed societies based on various forms of hunting, gathering, fishing, forestry, and agriculture. As Indigenous writers such as Robin Wall Kimmerer show in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, indigenous people have much to teach us about holistic thinking, the use of social controls to curtail greed, and how to live with the rest of nature.[4] This verse from the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address is a suitable way of thinking about our relationship with other animals as sources of pleasure and nourishment to be used respectfully and responsibly:

> We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the Animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We are honored by them when they give up their lives so we may use their bodies as food for our people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here and we hope that it will always be so.
>
> Now our minds are one.

Endnotes

1. Gary Haynes, "Hwange National Park: The Forest with a Desert Heat," July 2021, www.researchgate.net/publication/353495822_HWANGE_NATIONAL_PARK_THE_FOREST_WITH_A_DESERT_HEART.

2. Ian Parker, "An Historical Note from Tsavo East National Park: Vegetation Changes over Time," *Pachyderm* 59 (2018): 109–113.

3. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

4. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

About the Author

Mike Jones teaches systems thinking for sustainable development at the Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences and promotes the application of systems thinking in IUCN's Commission on Ecosystem Management. He spent almost fifty years as a conservation and development practitioner, mostly in eastern and southern Africa with occasional forays to the United States of America, including developing networks of forward-thinking practitioners with the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

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