

Wilderness Versus the Environmentalism of South Africa's Poor?

Wilderness enthusiasts are often accused of anti-agricultural, anti-urban, and anti-industrial biases by defenders of "progress." They may throw back such accusations by asserting that economic growth, modern agriculture, urbanization and industrialization no longer present unavoidable environmental threats because of "ecological modernization." The march of technological progress towards a post-industrial service-based economy removes some environmental threats. According to this view, the main environmental threats are not in industry and cities. They come from the expansion of the human population and human activities into wild areas.

Hence, there is a possible alliance between currents of environmentalism identified as the "cult of wilderness" and the "gospel of eco-efficiency"¹ in order to enjoy economic growth in industrial-urban society while simultaneously salvaging some natural spaces.

But adherents to the "cult of wilderness" could instead join another alliance. Wilderness enthusiasts might recognize that economic growth implies larger environmental loads, which fall on poor people and on indigenous or "minority" populations (which are a majority of the world's population) whose struggles for livelihood are sometimes fought in idioms (such as the "sacredness" of Nature). This idiom should, in turn, be attractive to the wilderness enthusiasts.

Such an alliance is never easy. Often population growth, poverty and cultural traditions which may not always transmit "wilderness" values, may encroach upon and poach the great wilderness reserves

¹Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez-Alier, "Political Ecology, the Environmentalism of the Poor, and the Global Movement for Environmental Justice," *Kurswechsel* (Vienna), Heft 3, 1999.

whose preservation has been so much a product of “white” civilization, notably in eastern Africa and South Africa. Indeed, “the preoccupation of some whites with wildlife preservation at the expense of, for example, dispossessed rural communities may be historically demonstrable — but this should not blind us to the fact that South Africa now has one of the best systems of protected areas anywhere in the world. This is a national treasure from which all future South Africans will benefit.”²

Anti-pollution groups accuse mainstream U.S. environmental organizations of obsession with “elitist” goals such as wilderness preservation. A similar chasm has opened up in South Africa recently as radical activists influenced by the American environmental justice movement have rediscovered ecological issues.³ These include land degradation due to unequal land distribution, asbestos and herbicides dangers, health conditions in mines, lack of water in black urban settlements. Thus, the environmental justice movement is consciously present not only in the United States but also in South Africa, First World and Third World: two countries whose dominant environmental tradition is the “cult of wilderness” but also where environmentalism and anti-racism have found one another.

However, South Africa is very different from the United States. For instance, where South Africa has lions and elephants, it also has peasants. The explicit use of “environmental justice” by activists in South Africa (because of direct influence from the United States) is an exciting harbinger of a wider intercontinental movement. A majority of South Africa’s population is potentially concerned with environmental justice issues. Attempts have been made in South Africa (and elsewhere) to discard colonial notions that preservation of Nature cannot be achieved unless indigenous people are removed. In place of these notions, increasingly South Africa involves local people in managing reserves, offering them economic incentives, like paying local villagers a share of ecotourist (or even controlled hunting) revenues.

Beyond this, an Environmental Justice Networking Forum in South Africa has been mobilizing a new environmental constituency focussing attention on a range of urban, land and water management,

²See Ledger, in Jacklyn Cock and Eddie Koch, eds., *Going Green: People, Politics and the Environment in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³William Beinart and Peter Coates, *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

environmental health, and pollution-related problems, which had not been considered by “wilderness” NGOs. For instance, the Forum interprets land erosion as a consequence of the unequal distribution of land, a result of crowding African populations into “homelands” under apartheid. Another instance: expanding tree plantations for paper and pulp create “green deserts,” which are resisted locally.⁴

Other environmental liabilities the apartheid regime left behind now surface. Best known is the South African asbestos scandal. Asbestosis victims initiated international litigation against British companies, particularly Cape. The victims’ lawyers argue Cape was aware of asbestos dangers from at least 1931 onwards, when asbestos regulations were introduced in Britain.

Medical researchers earlier found that 80 percent of Penge’s black miners (in Northern Province) dying between 1959 and 1964 had asbestosis. The average age of the victims was 43 years. Cape operated a mill for 34 years in Prieska, Northern Cape, where 13 percent of workers’ deaths were attributed to mesothelioma, a very painful asbestos related cancer. Asbestos levels in this mill in 1948 were almost 30 times the maximum UK limit. There are other cases in South Africa of asbestos contamination, by companies such as Msauli and GEFECO, at locations such as Mafefe, Pomfret, Barberton, Badplass.⁵

Nevertheless production continued in South Africa with the same low safety standards until the late 1970s. Contaminated mines and asbestos dumps must nowadays be rehabilitated by the post-apartheid South African governments.

Simultaneously, the House of Lords ruled for a while (until July 1999, when the judgement was reversed) that in this case, a British company such as Cape could be sued in a British court. Against WTO doctrine, the asbestos court case and similar ones, if successful, would show that international regulation is required not only about the safety and quality of the final products but also in the process of production and its side-effects. When regulation failed or was non-existent, and when effective protest was impossible because of political repression, there are then retrospective liabilities to be faced. The courts will

⁴Cock and Koch, *op. cit.*, pp. 176, 186; and R. Carrere and L. Lohman, *Pulping the South: Industrial Tree Plantations and the World Paper Economy* (London: Zed, 1996).

⁵*Ibid.*

perhaps institute little by little a sort of “Superfund”-style liability for the transnational companies.

Given half a chance, workers and their families would have complained, not so much because they were environmentalists but because their health was threatened. It might be the case that asbestos and mining companies complied with internal South African laws under apartheid regarding safety, wages, and taxes. They nevertheless should be held accountable for “externalities” they left behind. The law firm (called Leigh and Day) which represents the asbestosis victims also sued in London for damages to workers at Thor Chemicals in KwaZulu-Natal on behalf of mercury poison victims, and on behalf of cancer victims from Rio Tinto’s Rossing uranium mine in Namibia.⁶

In April 1990 massive concentrations of mercury had been detected in the Umgeweni River near the Thor Chemicals’ Cato Ridge plant. This was reported in the national and international press. Thor Chemicals imported mercury waste into South Africa, partly supplied by Cyanamid, an American company. South African environmental groups, mainly Earthlife under Chris Albertyn’s leadership, allied themselves with the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, the local African residents under their chief, and white farmers from the Tala Valley who had endured a bad experience of pesticide spraying from the neighboring sugar industry. A true “rainbow” alliance, also incorporating U.S. activists against the Cyanamid plant in question, complained against such “garbage imperialism” or “toxic colonialism.” They simply asked: “Why did Thor, a British company, decide to build the world’s largest toxic mercury recycling plant on the borders of KwaZulu in a fairly remote part of South Africa? Why not build it closer to the sources of the waste mercury in the United States or in Europe?”⁷

Actually, the Basel Convention of 1989, which forbids the export of hazardous waste, was complemented on March 25, 1994 by a full ban on all transboundary exports of hazardous waste from the 24 rich industrialized countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The agreement was reached over opposition of the richest countries, which received from Greenpeace in this context the name of the Sinister Seven. Some defections inside the European Union (Denmark, and later Italy) helped an alliance among China, Eastern European countries, and southern poor countries close the “recycling”

⁶Ronnie Morris, “UK Court Demolishes Double Standards,” *Business Report*, March 4, 1999 and subsequent information downloaded from the web site saep.org.

⁷See Crompton and Erwin, in Cock and Koch, *op. cit.*, note 4, pp. 82-84.

loophole of the initial 1989 convention through which 90 percent of toxic waste flowed.

Thus, in theory, a sad chapter of industrialization was closed, where rich countries were able to exploit the weaker regulations of poorer countries to avoid their own responsibility for minimizing waste. Clearly, however, the issue is far from over. The logic of Lawrence Summers' Principle remains compelling.⁸ Also, new opportunities of dumping waste might develop in the vastly under-polluted ocean. If those deeply cherishing Nature join organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, the IUCN, and the Sierra Club, should also become aware of the environmental threats to peasants, miners, the urban poor, and indigenous peoples around the world, then an alliance would be possible between the trends of environmentalism which I call "the cult of wilderness" and "the environmentalism of the poor."

⁸Internal World Bank memo, as reported in *The Economist*, February 8, 1992, under the title "Let Them Eat Pollution." This has become a favorite text for the Environmental Justice movement.