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Opinion: The changing of Africa's conservation landscape

Posted on **October 25, 2019** by [Don Scott](#) in the [OPINION EDITORIAL](#) post series.

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The 2019 Business of Conservation Conference (BCC) in Rwanda © Don Scott

OPINION POST by [Don Scott](#)

Some weeks ago, I wrote a short blog piece about the changing face of Africa's conservation landscape and the positive economic influence of the Greater Kruger National Park and its constituent reserves. Now, in light of the recent Business of Conservation Conference in Rwanda, I re-visit this topic with a much broader point of view, one concerning the whole of Africa.

The changing of Africa's conservation landscape is taking place in response to, and amidst the well-known urgent issues such as the shrinking and fragmentation of wilderness habitats; the relentless onslaught of poaching and the organised crime syndicates behind it; and the loss of biodiversity due to poor land management. There is no doubt that in the last century, the pace of modernisation and industrialisation has led to a degradation of Earth's natural resources with mass extinctions, habitat loss, biodiversity loss and climate change to name a few.

Of course, mitigating these problems requires huge financial investments. It sometimes feels like conservation efforts for us here in Africa have been going backwards – receding – as we wait for another subsidy or philanthropic donation. Very few conservation organisations, or countries, in Africa can boast that their conservation efforts are self-funding, not to mention profit-making. The model that funded African conservation for decades, driven by governments, local and international NGOs, and wealthy philanthropists no longer makes sense. In short, Africa needs a paradigm shift.

SO HOW WILL WE DO THIS?

Enter Fred Swaniker (a highly successful African social entrepreneur) and his African Leadership University (ALU) – a university that is being referred to as the 'Harvard of Africa'. Their Business of Conservation Conference (BCC), now in its second highly successful year, has started a movement to ground African environmental efforts in Africa through nurturing African leadership, championing a people-centric approach, and focusing on making the environmental dividend of Africa attractive as a business proposition and *not* as a charity proposition.

I was privileged and inspired to attend the recent 'BCC 2019' in Kigali, Rwanda. Attracting 324 delegates, from over 50 countries, some of the most innovative minds and organisations in Africa's environmental landscape were in attendance. These included a variety of government officials from across the continent – the Prime Minister of Rwanda was there, as well as the former Prime Minister of Ethiopia. NGOs represented at CEO level were the likes of African Parks, WWF, Conservation International, Wild Aid and the MAVA Foundation, to name a few. Then, importantly, high level delegates of some extremely innovative businesses investing in the African environment were in attendance including finance and investment businesses, technology businesses and tourism businesses. And to add a celebrity hue on the proceedings, Naomi Campbell also attended!

So, what was the core message and learning which came out of this conference and why is it important to us?

The main message is that the conservation industry in Africa needs to reframe itself as a growth sector. “Easier said than done!” many will say. Nevertheless, all journeys begin by taking your first steps and I believe that the African environmental sector has done so. Fred Swaniker himself put the requirements for changing the industry into three clearly defined needs.

The first is engaging governments to create an enabling environment for the sector to thrive; the second is to attract and retain the best talent in the environmental sector; and the third is for the conservation industry to make money and in so doing provide real returns for investors and real dividends to the communities who host our businesses. Fred went on to highlight that the very word “conservation” invokes an atmosphere of holding on to something that is scarce, and this could be why the conservation industry is perceived as receding. His proposal at this year’s conference was that we rather define ourselves as the “Environmental Investment” sector, implying growth and abundance, and I couldn’t agree more.

Fred Swaniker addressing the audience during the 2019 Business of Conservation Conference (BCC) © Don Scott

Naturally, the photographic safari industry (my own industry) plays an important role in Environmental Investment, and offers a means to generate benefits to both investors and local communities. Many believe it is the only solution to Africa’s Environmental Investment landscape. However, since the wilderness landscape cannot sustain “overtourism,” our role is not the single panacea to the sector’s potential transformation into a growth industry. As with all broadly complex industries crossing multitudes of national boundaries, and faced with multitudes of challenges and opportunities, there is a wealth of different economic activities and offerings that will act together to form a mosaic which drives the industry’s growth.

Two striking examples tell the story of how innovative business opportunities already emerged from the conference: Africa’s ability to act as a global carbon sink through the maintenance and growth of our abundant forests; and Africa’s ability to harness our bio-diversity for the production of clean air and fresh water, both essential commodities for the sustainability of global businesses. Just as climate change has become recognised as being a real threat to the ability of big business worldwide to continue to thrive, so too is the global need for fresh air and clean water.

Well maintained wilderness spaces, offering expansive biodiversity, are characterised by natural processes that offer the planet a filter for our air and water. Biodiversity is now finally on the agenda of global big business, as there is a growing realisation that without fresh air and clean water, their customers and hence their businesses will cease to exist. These are both game changing concepts. They offer an opportunity for Africa to harness its biodiversity and wilderness resources and to sell the outputs of those natural systems (carbon offset, fresh air and clean water) as real dividends to other countries and businesses whose activities are driving carbon emissions and polluting their part of the planet.



Also, one of the very clear messages that came out of the three days of talks was that in order for the environmental sector to thrive, it must be outwardly focused and must embrace and engage the communities in which it operates as partners in business. Gone are the days when community development meant painting schools or handing out of T-shirts or soccer balls. The essential roles here must be ones of partnerships in business, as this is the only true method for communities to reap tangible benefits by supporting the Environmental Investment sector. This resonated with the work that is currently happening around the Greater Kruger National Park complex of reserves, and which was very much the subject of my [previous blog post](#). In fact, I felt that our colleagues throughout Africa, whilst faced with similar challenges, have begun this process some time ago and that the South African environmental sector could learn much from other African players.

Whichever commercial activity is relevant to a particular wilderness region (photographic tourism, carbon offset programs, biodiversity programs, bio-prospecting etc.), the message is that the local communities have to form an integral part of that economic activity. In practice, this could mean that they act as providers of real estate and earn concession or rental fees for the provision of their land. This could also mean that they offer essential services as part of the supply chain of a local environmental economy. Ideally, they would own and run the businesses that drive the wilderness economy of a region. The level of operational involvement, investment or auxiliary services provided by local communities may vary greatly in different parts of Africa. However, the underlying commitment required from the commercial enterprises to engage with their communities remains a key factor in the sustainability prospects of

those landscapes. This is an essential change in the evolving African Environmental Investment sector.

One of the first steps in this new direction was a commitment from Fred Swaniker that a priority area of research in the ALU's School of Wildlife Conservation will now be the analysis of all of the reserve areas across Africa to establish their current immediate, local economic impact, as well as their impact on the country/countries, and regions, that host them. The results of such research will support the Environmental Investment industry in convincing business and governments of their economic relevance and to therefore attract further investment to scale existing projects or motivate new ones. Interestingly, this is the very research that my previous blog post covered, and it would therefore seem that the Greater Kruger National Park (GKNP) is ahead of the curve on this activity and could act as an example of how to approach the analysis of other reserve areas across Africa. Some of the key findings in the research on the economic impact of the Greater Kruger were as follows:

1. A total of **R6 billion in GDP** to South Africa's economy.

2. **R5 billion in tax revenue.**

3. **22,300 jobs, earning wages of R3.4 billion.**

These are no small numbers. Considering that the bulk of this impact currently comes from tourism, the GKNP sustains nearly 6% of the total tourism contribution to South African GDP, with only 7,000 total beds available in accommodation. Just imagine the contribution that the GKNP could make to South Africa's GDP through the concept of quantifying the area's biodiversity value and selling that as a dividend to businesses who need to offset their pollution quotient. If the movement started by the ALU and Business of Conservation Conference continues to grow, this could well become a reality within the next decade.

Anyone involved in the South African environmental sector should consider attending BCC 2020 and become part of the new movement which I predict will see the Conservation sector changing into the Environmental Investment sector and becoming a vital driver within the African economy. This mind-set drives a new African conservation agenda. As a proud Environmental Investor in the GKNP, I'll be back in 2020 for more inspiration!



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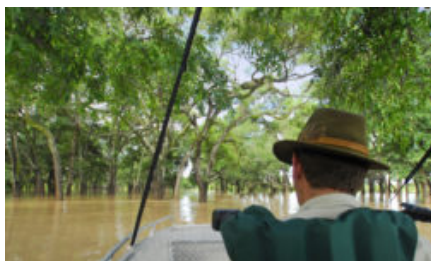
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About [Don Scott](#)

Don Scott has over 15 years of experience in the Aerospace Engineering Industry in Africa, Europe and the USA, as well as 15 years in the Photographic Safari Tourism industry. Don's journey with tourism started in the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve in 2001. Today, Don and his wife, Nina, are the owners of the [Tanda Tula camps](#) in the Timbavati. Don is deeply involved and dedicated to both community development and conservation through tourism in the region. He sits on the executive committee of the Timbavati, on the Joint Operations Committee for the APNR node of Greater Kruger, and he served on the Greater Kruger task team for Responsible Tourism and Best Practice.

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