

Putting African people at the centre of the African conservation agenda

By Gail C. Thomson, Resource Africa Southern Africa

- The African Protected Areas Congress (APAC), hosted by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), was launched to position African protected and conserved areas within the broader goals of economic development and community well being.
- As the first Congress of its kind, APAC is an important step away from ‘fortress conservation’ approaches and towards African-driven biodiversity conservation.
- Indigenous people and local communities (IPLCs) from across Africa, including a strong delegation from southern Africa, were able to share ideas and chart the way forward for community conservation.
- Developing a unified African voice and vision is key to influencing global conventions relating to climate change, biodiversity conservation and wildlife trade.

It is quite astonishing that the first ever APAC was held in July 2022, given that the first protected areas were established in Africa during the 19th century. Why has it taken so long for Africa to have its own Congress of this kind? What was the result of this dialogue, and how will it influence conservation-related decisions and policies in Africa and the rest of the world?

Breaking down barriers to African participation in conservation

One of the main reasons for the previous lack of discussion at this scale and platform among African people about African conservation relates to why protected areas were proclaimed in the first place: to protect what was left of the wildlife after its near eradication during colonisation, for the purposes and pleasure of the colonisers at the time.

Strictly protected areas, using a ‘fortress conservation’ approach, created divisions between African people and nature – not surprising given that social division was a well-used tool in the colonisation toolbox. This approach was driven by an underlying philosophy that conservation can only be achieved in the absence of human beings. It has therefore taken centuries for African people to regain their role in driving biodiversity conservation in Africa.

Perhaps the other reasons for this are logistical and financial. Many of the delegates to APAC felt like they had been bounced around half of Africa *en route* to the Rwandan capital of Kigali – COVID-19 has not helped the dire state of intra-African travel. These flights and hotel stays during the Congress all cost money, which was frequently provided using non-African donor funds. This reflects another theme of the Congress: the need for African sustainable financing models to lessen our dependence on the international community, thus freeing Africans to conserve biodiversity based on African values. It’s a challenge that resonates with broader conversations about development in Africa.

Indigenous people and local communities raise their voices

Crossing these barriers to meaningful participation was especially challenging for the people who did not represent well-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and who have felt excluded from African conservation, past and present. These indigenous people and local communities (IPLCs) organised their own pre-congress to discuss their views of protected areas in Africa and explore their common issues with current conservation practices. They were rewarded with opportunities to make opening and closing statements and contribute to the Kigali Call to Action – a major outcome of the whole Congress.

The persistent contributions of IPLCs through formal documents and engagements during the Congress gave the final Call to Action a distinctive grassroots flavour that would have been absent without them. Their voices and perspectives were encapsulated by the clear call to ‘put people at the centre of conservation’ in Africa. In practice, this means moving away from the militarised, fortress approach and towards community-led conservation that taps into the knowledge and capacity of IPLCs relating to their lands, waters and resources.

As demonstrated during the Congress itself, moving in this direction will require lowering the barriers to meaningful participation and providing real opportunities for communities to engage the highest levels of authority and influence. Lowering the barriers means providing direct funding to community-based organisations that are conserving ecosystems and wildlife that are globally valued. Providing space for participation includes recognising and respecting the rights of IPLCs to use and manage natural resources where they live, while actively involving them in the management of existing protected areas.

Improving the state of community conservation in southern Africa

The diversity of Africa and its people was reflected by the variety of approaches to both protected area and community conservation taken in different countries and regions. Delegates from the Community Leaders Network of Southern Africa (CLN) discussed aspects of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), which has been widely adopted in the region. Their discussions focused on moving CBNRM forwards through improving community governance structures, reducing human-wildlife conflict, strengthening local wildlife economies, and addressing the major challenges of climate change and wildlife crime.

While southern Africans celebrate their rights to manage and use their plants and animals, the lack of secure land tenure and absence of holistic government policies covering all aspects CBNRM were identified as remaining hurdles. Improving the state of CBNRM is not left to government policies alone, however, as communities can take the initiative in various ways.

First, governance must reach below the level of elected committees and to every village and household, making CBNRM fully inclusive and transparent. Second, communities can collect and collate their own data to measure their progress on environment, social and governance factors to demonstrate their efforts in ways that external investors can understand and support. Resource Africa, an organisation based

in southern Africa that supports communities involved in CBNRM programmes (represented by CLN), is currently driving a project with communities to develop tools to accomplish this.

Third, communities can influence the law by establishing their own biocultural community protocols that express their relationship with nature in clear legal terms. Finally, community-based organisations can improve their ability to generate benefits for their members by adopting a more business-like approach to financial management and expanding their revenue streams to include emerging markets (e.g. carbon credits).

Although African approaches to community conservation may be diverse (CBNRM in southern Africa is one of many), the Congress showed that unity was nonetheless achievable and desirable. Nearly all of the CLN sessions at APAC included Africans from beyond southern Africa, who were encouraged to learn more about this approach and share lessons and perspectives from their own countries. This unity was further expressed in the final statement issued by IPLCs from across Africa to APAC, presented by CLN's own Malidadi Langa from Malawi, during the closing ceremony.

From local to global – influencing international conventions

Everyone attending the Congress agreed that this was a long overdue forum for Africans to discuss conserving biodiversity and respond to climate change, which are the twin crises of our day. This gathering will therefore be the first of many. Yet talking about what we are going to do is just the first step – the time between Congresses must be used to implement the Call to Action within Africa and to communicate this view to the rest of the world.

The timing of the first APAC (despite COVID-related delays) is perfect for the forthcoming global conferences of the IUCN World Conservation Congress, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES). Each of these conferences has the potential to either reinforce the African vision of conservation or undermine it, depending on the decisions taken. It is therefore imperative that the unified African perspective developed in Kigali is taken into these global negotiations.

The CBD's post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework was a particularly hot topic at APAC, especially the much vaunted 30 by 30 target (30% of earth's land and sea protected by 2030). IPLCs are deeply concerned that this target could be used as an excuse to dispossess them of their lands and trample their rights to resources in the name of conservation, thus reinforcing the 'fortress conservation' approach. In contrast, the Kigali Call to Action focuses on using 30 by 30 to support community conservation efforts by incorporating them into this global target, rather than dispossessing them further.

Dealing with climate change impacts was another cross-cutting issue, since many rural African communities bear the brunt of extreme weather events, while their forests, rangelands and coastal ecosystems are crucial nature-based solutions to the crisis. As with biodiversity conservation, plans related to mitigating and adapting to

climate change must include the ideas, aspirations and traditional knowledge of indigenous people groups and local communities. This message needs to be taken up strongly at the next UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (CoP).

As the international governing body for the trade of plants and animals, CITES links conservation with international trade. Unfortunately, CITES Conventions have historically deepened divisions within Africa, especially due to external lobby groups working hard to pit African countries against each other. The discussions at APAC revealed that there were many more things uniting Africans than dividing us, which includes recognising sustainable use of plants and animals as a means of supporting local livelihoods and generating revenue for conservation.

Conclusion – the future of African conservation is bright

From a dark history of colonialism through to current militarised and fortress-style approaches, conservation in Africa has often been viewed as a foreign idea that was and continues to be imposed by powerful external forces on African people. APAC has shown that there is no reason for this state of affairs to continue. Community-led conservation – based on recognising the rights and abilities of people to conserve their own lands, waters and resources – provides a brighter future for African conservation. Now that the Congress – and the centuries-long wait for Africans to convene for this important internal conservation dialogue – is over, it is up to us to make this new African vision for protected and conserved areas a reality.

ENDS.

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