VOICES from the Environmental Movement

PERSPECTIVES FOR A NEW ERA

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6 International Conservation Leadership and the Challenges of the Nineties

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ONE OF THE most important developments in the international conservation movement has been the flourishing of effective local organizations, particularly in Latin America, during the eighties. The nineties, however, present new challenges that will require many changes, not only in the way we conduct conservation tasks, but also in the relationships between the local groups and their U.S. counterparts.

Until the late 1970s there were very few organizations in the United States that put any effort into what is now called "international conservation." The recognition that most of the world's biodiversity is found in tropical nations and that many of the species of birds familiar to the United States are migrant ones that need safe places to live in Central and South America promoted the concept to "think globally, act locally" in the early 1980s. As a result, U.S. organizations have either helped to create new organizations in Latin America or supported existing ones. Since then, some of those local organizations have become quite successful despite the difficulties in developing new nonprofit institutions in countries with little tradition for private environmental action and philanthropic support.

This chapter will deal with what I believe are the key issues in the relationships between U.S. conservation organizations and their Latin American counterparts—issues that should be resolved rapidly and effectively if we really want to preserve in perpetuity a sizable

representation of the world's natural heritage. These issues can be grouped into five categories: cultural barriers, training, science, ethics, and leadership. Although the different areas overlap in many instances, I have chosen them for the sake of organizing this discussion.

Cultural Barriers

Enormous cultural barriers separate U.S. and Latin American conservation organizations. These barriers present the most sensitive and complicated problems regarding the establishment of trust among the organizations. Most of us tend to ignore them, but this in turn causes a permanent sense of tension. Above all, we must remember that despite being in the same hemisphere, the United States does not share much history in common with countries south of the Rio Grande. Spanish America was first conquered and then colonized under the signs of the Inquisition and the Counter-Reformation, while Anglo-Saxons escaped from religious intolerance to the New World. While the United States based its independence on the liberal philosophy of John Locke, the French Revolution influenced the notion of independence in Latin America. These historical differences must be appreciated when comparing how conservationists from the United States and Latin America envision the environmental problems of the tropics.

For example, the destruction of the New World's rain forests is now a matter of fashion and newsworthiness in the developed world. While a few years ago the destruction of wetlands (and before that, during the height of Cousteau's popularity, the destruction of the oceans' resources) occupied such attention, today there is a sudden concern for the protection of rain forests. This faddishness may raise the awareness of the uninformed general public, but we in Latin America view all of these trends as inconsistent with real needs. Neither the oceans nor the wetlands were saved through faddish attention, nor, we suspect, will the rain forests be saved this way either.

We watch sadly as those sources of funding that yesterday supported wetlands conservation today support only the preservation of rain forests. Although we recognize the news value of stories about the rain forests for the American news media, we believe they have little impact on the conscience and attitudes of Latins.

In the same way, the "hamburger debate," which tried to reduce the complexities of forest preservation to the amount of fast food consumed by the American public, was viewed as specious in Latin America. Why? Because people in the United States generally do not perceive the pressures felt by many tropical countries to develop their pristine areas. Nor do North Americans comprehend how little moral authority is given to the natural resource experts in a country that bases its own development entirely on the rapid destruction of natural areas.

People and organizations on both sides of the Rio Grande have lacked the sensitivity and understanding necessary to provide effective solutions to the destruction of tropical rain forests. From the North we have seen generalized approaches to the problem, as if all Latin American countries were identical, as if experience in the United States could be transplanted anywhere, as if there were nothing worthwhile already in place in those countries, as if we had time to spend developing philosophies and planning endlessly without real interest in the objectives, and as if Latin American organizations should behave like local chapters of organizations in the United States.[1]

On the other hand, many attitudes in Latin America have also undermined the ability to attain swift and positive results. Latin Americans fail to understand that philanthropy as it is practiced north of the Rio Grande is almost unique to the United States, and that there are sincere reasons for doing something for the common good. At the other extreme we find some Latin groups willing to do anything their U.S. counterparts tell them to do as long as there is money available for it, even if it is a bad idea.

Conservation leaders in the United States need to communicate better with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Latin Amer-

ica. New policies of communication should be based on the following principles:

1. Be candid about the nature of the relationship by clearly stating what is being offered and what is expected in return.
2. Maintain, through electronic and conventional mail as well as face-to-face meetings, a continuous flow of substantive information about the activities, challenges, successes, and difficulties of all cooperating organizations in the United States and Latin America.
3. Develop close relationships among the major sources of funding in the United States and the ultimate recipients of that support in Latin America, even if such an approach generates a shortsighted panic among the institutions based in the United States.

Only through effective and energetic communication will we be able to lower the cultural barriers that separate us. For historical, political and economic reasons, such initiatives must be advanced by U.S. organizations. There is more and more resentment in Latin America toward conservation organizations in the United States. U.S. groups have become increasingly less enthusiastic, generous, and committed than before, due in part to the fact that they have overextended themselves. Moreover, they have become less aggressive in pursuing hard cash and more entangled in "fund-raising" sideshows, such as debt swaps and cooperation with multilateral agencies. These actions look good to the shortsighted, but they do not meet Latin American needs for hard currency and a commitment in perpetuity.

Let both sides explore the problems that unite rather than divide them. For the first time, let both sides formulate serious and precise plans of action aimed at preserving most of what is left of the rain forests. But let us do it now, with the utmost frankness and determination, and not from the shadows of equivocal attitudes and misleading behavior.

Training

How do we provide sufficient training to the future *leaders* in conservation in developing countries? I must stress the word *leaders* since it is the key to the whole issue. We must remember that what we really need for the job are not simply managers but leaders—people who are able to provide a vision for the future. We need honest and creative men and women who possess a single-minded obsession for what they want to achieve, and the ability to communicate and motivate so that they receive the support they need.

We cannot create leaders; we may train them for specific tasks and offer them opportunities to improve and perfect themselves, but we cannot instill in them the attributes of leadership. Thus, the first task of any U.S. conservation group that wants to find an effective partner is to identify those people with leadership potential. I am sorry to say that there is no magic test for that, except that leaders always manage to distinguish themselves once challenges and opportunities are offered to them. What is required is the sensitivity to perceive leaders when they arise.

We thus cannot plan for a one-dimensional training program or a rigid academic curriculum. Some leaders will learn best through informal contacts with colleagues, by visiting new centers for the development of ideas, or by merely having access to information. Others will profit more from a scholastic approach. What is most important is that we learn to recognize leaders as they emerge.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there were hardly any places in Latin America where regional conservation leaders could go for training. Peregrination to the United States to "learn the business" was almost an obligation. But things are changing. Now there are several successful Latin American organizations with one unquestionable advantage over their counterparts in the United States: They have saved land directly in the neotropics.

The time will come when Latin American conservation leaders will be trained at home and mostly by other Latins, so that they find experiences to which they can relate more easily. Such centers for learning, if properly designed for leaders, should resemble Plato's

Akademeia or Aristotle's *Lykeion*. They should be centers for both holistic and specialized approaches toward the science and art of conservation leadership and management—centers where ideas flow freely; places where every man and woman will learn according to individual requirements; places for strengthening strengths and weakening weaknesses, using the most modern communications techniques and stimulating the exchange of scholars, experts, and leaders; places where the future can be envisioned and its path can be mapped.

This may sound elitist to some, but I think it is realistic. The big changes in the course of human history have occurred thanks to an elite corps of leaders who knew what they had to do and how to do it, and, most important, who did it.

We will return to the topic of international leadership later.

Science

Continuous change and the revision of ideas and methods are the hallmarks of science. Yet many visiting scientists involved in tropical conservation seem to believe that the customs and practices they bring with them are immutable. A brief review will help to illustrate this problem.

From the earliest days of involvement of U.S. conservation groups in the neotropics, science programs have been sold as an indispensable tool for creating capabilities to identify, select, protect, and monitor natural areas.[2] Two different kinds of programs have been used, and both have strengths and weaknesses. The first one, which I will call the academic-random program, supports purely academic projects aimed at producing knowledge for its own sake. An example would be a study to determine how many eggs an endangered species lays. The program had its origin in the British perspective of wildlife conservation in Africa, where the units of conservation are the species, and the closer those species could be shown to be conservation "pets" the better.

This program may produce valuable information on species whose

natural histories are unknown, thus allowing conservationists to have a better understanding of what they are trying to preserve. But since the researchers in charge of the program are intent upon producing results that will fit the standards of a thesis or a professional journal, these investigations produce a lot of information that could be considered "noise" for those who need specific facts in order to proceed with conservation management plans to protect natural areas rather than species. Also, this kind of program can cover, at best, only a handful of the species inhabiting high-diversity ecosystems such as coral reefs or tropical rain forests, and it rarely takes into account the problems of land management. Thus it can be termed both an academic and a random program.

The second program, which I call the typological program, involves the development of checklist-oriented inventories of fauna, flora, and ecosystems using cookbook methodologies and typologies. It was developed by U.S. scientists mostly to identify, select, and monitor the last remaining pockets of natural diversity in countries such as the United States, where most of the biological diversity had been wiped out by the turn of the century. In the United States, the big natural areas fell into the hands of park managers and the smaller, pocket areas became the responsibility of state governments and private conservation groups.

The typological program was thus engineered as an inventory-oriented task, identifying rare and threatened biota and using computers to record them. It was devised in part to influence state and local goverments to act whenever private conservation groups decided not to preserve pocket areas through acquisition, donation, leasing, or some form of cooperative agreement with private owners.

This kind of program is better suited to the identification, selection, design, and monitoring of small natural areas, since the information generated rapidly becomes *asymptotic*. It usually considers the same amount of information about terrestrial vertebrates and vascular plants, following a rigid methodology in order to ensure homogenous results. In this way it resembles the classification system proposed by numerical taxonomists in the 1960s.[3]

The typological program has been very successful in the United

States precisely because it works well in small areas with low biodiversity. But when transplanted to the neotropics, the flaws in the program begin to appear.

First, we are dealing here with tropical lands of enormous biodiversity. Moreover, the acreages proposed for national parks are substantial, often exceeding 1 million acres. These are not the tiny, low-diversity woodlots typically held by private conservation groups in the United States. Some of them rank in the top ten globally among areas identified for their biological diversity.

Second, the typologies developed for natural areas in the United States do not apply in the neotropics, where more complex but poorly known ecosystems abound. This forces the architects of the program to face one of the great dilemmas of the typological mind: whether to change the nomenclature and sometimes even the very nature of the "types," which are the very units of the research program.

Third, because of the vast acreages to be covered, one zoologist, one botanist, and one ecologist cannot possibly survey and categorize the biodiversity within a reasonable time, especially when there is an urgent need to protect the area. This has forced typologists to use remote sensing and geographic information systems, but these techniques do not come without resistance. They force profound changes in the ways in which typologists have operated successful programs in the United States. Resistance toward innovation is one of the great paradoxes of the scientific revolution as it is described by Thomas Kuhn.[4]

Conservation scientists in the neotropics do not suggest that typological programs should be abandoned, but that they should be modified and expanded to take into account the unprecedented scientific problems presented by tropical environments. This suggestion apparently sounds like heresy to the old-guard typologists of the U.S. conservation groups.

Another factor which cannot be ignored is that the economic survival of these programs in Latin America depends on how they are viewed with respect to solving local problems. For better or worse, Landsat photography and colorful maps tend to appear more useful

to Latin American leaders than gray, Latinate lists of "elements of occurrence."

Moreover, information systems should be designed to include the characterization of human activities *within* the natural areas slated for preservation as well as in the surrounding areas. Fences and No Trespassing signs are hardly a source of local conflict in the United States, but in many parts of Latin America they are a prescription for trouble.

In order to make typological programs universal and effective in Latin America, we must

1. make them more flexible and maintain a philosophy of flexibility.
2. bring Latin American conservation scientists into the discussion so that the methodology becomes as useful as possible.
3. agree not to promote the methodology in Latin America as if it were a franchise, but rather make sure that each information system accommodates not only local ecological differences but also local needs.
4. agree to transfer new technologies to the information system centers in Latin America.

Ethics

Since the early 1980s, Latin American conservation groups have flourished in a difficult environment. They have managed not only to survive, but to accomplish tasks with undeniable technical skill. They once needed both technical and financial support from their counterparts in the United States, but their technical needs are now far fewer and their fund-raising capabilities, particularly at the local level, have improved. Nevertheless, they remain very much dependent on money raised from sources in the United States.

Meanwhile, conservation groups in the United States have also experienced an evolution. Financially, they are now much less supportive of Latin American organizations. I believe that this is the result of

three problems: the overextension of programs, the lack of aggressiveness in opening new markets for international conservation within the philanthropic community of the United States, and a lack of courage and direction among the leadership of many organizations.

As a consequence, I see two trends that I believe are ethically questionable. One concerns the third-party management of money. The other relates to the way in which U.S.-based conservation groups choose how, when, and whom they should help.

With Latin American conservation groups becoming technically more proficient and gaining more direct access to important funders in the United States, the original role of international conservationists from the States has fallen into a twilight. Yet instead of reshaping themselves and injecting new vitality into their role as catalyzers promoting the maturity of Latin NGOs, many groups in the United States have proposed charging fees to cover the costs of fund-raising for Latin groups.

This new trend is dangerous because it converts what should be a purely philanthropic endeavor into a commercial one, thus altering the character of the relationship from a fight for a cause into a lucrative transaction. At its worst, this could frighten away good-faith donors who want to see all of their contribution go directly to the cause. We cannot afford to reduce the already tiny philanthropic market for international conservation.

When faced with these objections, the leaders of U.S. organizations respond that fund-raising carries a cost and that, after all, they do the same with their state chapters. But Latin American conservation groups should not be treated as chapters. They are and must continue to be independent. Moreover, the Latin groups remain fragile financially. Fees charged for transactions are dollars that are not spent where they are most needed. Latin American organizations would prefer working with fund-raising agents who share their mission of helping to preserve the world's natural heritage. There are legitimate for-profit groups that could raise money for a fee, but working with them smacks of commercializing our cause.

The other ethical issue concerns the direction in which the money

should go. Since the beginning of relations among Latin and U.S.-based conservation groups, there has been much confusion on this point.

The tendency to try to do everything everywhere has stretched financial and personnel resources beyond manageability. The lesson from successful corporations that success depends on doing a few things well seems to have been ignored by many NGOs in the United States.

Once a diverse menu of countries, local NGOs, and projects has been established, the nightmare of questions begins. Should efforts be concentrated in countries where the ecological situation is the worst but the chances for success are dim? Should resources flow to local NGOs that have already shown vigor and the elements of success, or would they be better spent on groups that have never seemed to take off?

These are not easy choices to make, but I can help by harking back to my own original reason for getting involved in conservation: namely, to save what really can be saved as soon as possible. For that purpose, time, effort, and money are best spent where the chances of success are greatest. The cause is too important and the resources too limited to risk failure. No matter how much we desire to, we cannot save the whole world.

While many organizations in the United States have faced this reality, they have not always made the best choices. More and more emphasis is being placed on efforts that appear to be charitable and receive favorable press—the efforts in October 1988 to save three gray whales near Alaska, for example—but that have dubious merit in saving a species or a natural area. It is also of doubtful honor to help only those organizations that unerringly do as they are told.

Quality results will come from a relationship with quality partners who will necessarily be critical and independent. A clear message to follow rather than lead will discourage the good work and intentions of the well-staffed Latin American groups. They will not conduct themselves well with a banana republic mentality.

These are trends of deteriorating ethics. If they continue, we shall be faced with the subversion of the conservation cause and the cor-

ruption of the Latin groups. If organizations in the United States, born into a society of puritanical traditions, cannot hold true to their own principles, then what can be expected of organizations that work in an environment where the boundaries between what is legal and what is ethical are so much less clearly drawn?

It is time to respond to the challenges of a changing world creatively and honestly and, most important, in a way that will make us feel proud.

Leadership

The crisis we face in the relationships among our organizations is a crisis of leadership.

In the early 1980s, conservation groups in the United States promoted the idea of preserving the world's natural heritage through the actions of local organizations. They fully supported them with technical and financial aid, and in doing so the leadership of those groups in the United States demonstrated courage and vision. Without that, private action in international conservation would be much less promising and effective than it is today.

But today we face new challenges. The needs of organizations now in place are different than they were five or ten years ago. The continuing devastation of Latin American resources, the existence of new technologies that could be applied to conservation, the complexities and intricacies of each Latin American country, and the need for greater financial resources all cry out for more sophisticated leadership on both sides of the Rio Grande.

Our concern should be about the future. The old era is ending, and the old ways will no longer do. As Winston Churchill said: "If we open a quarrel between the present and the past, we shall be in danger of losing the future." Today we need a leadership that is more attentive to the agendas of the Latin groups than to the old political quarrels among organizations in the United States. We need a leadership that is more interested in making substantial contributions, which will lie far beyond the flashy debt-swap deals and the complicated

schemes for solving problems with intricate, theoretical drawings. They lack realism. John F. Kennedy said: "Courage, not complacency, is our need today—leadership, not salesmanship."[5]

We cannot expect change to happen by itself. It is the responsibility of the leadership of the Latin American conservation movement to be persistent and patient—persistent in our determination to make our fellow conservationists in the North more aware and sensitive, patient against our desperation to see our problems solved as demanded by the circumstances.

I want to return now to the first proposal made in this chapter, for a meeting of the minds and spirits of the leadership of the two cultures. I remember how the chairman of a major organization in the United States told me, out of sincerity, that one of the biggest problems he faced in the international arena was that his organization did not know where to turn, where best to place resources in the arena of international conservation. My response could not have been more simple: Listen to us, listen to the ones who face the daily hardships of maintaining private organizations where there is little tradition for private action, who have to raise money where there is little tradition for philanthropy, who have to authorize the payroll with no guarantee that they will be able to do so again next year or even next month.

The 1990s will demand imagination, decisiveness, and courage. We face the choice between greatness or decline in our own organizations, between the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of the status quo. We face the choice between excellence and mediocrity. There are many who wait upon our decision.

Notes

1. For a more extensive discussion of these issues, see Aldemaro Romero, "Thirteen Fatal Errors," *Foundation News* 29 (4): 58–60.
2. I use the term "science program" in the same sense as D. L. Hull, *Science as a Process: An Evolutionary Account of the Social and Conceptual Development of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
3. Hull, *Science as a Process.*

4. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
5. Acceptance of presidential nomination, Democratic National Convention, Los Angeles, California, July 15, 1960.

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