



**Balancing Sustainable  
Development and  
Ecological Values**

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I found the Vth World Parks  
Congress in Durban, South Africa, to

be a vivid reminder of the differences in conservation programs and priorities between the United States and the rest of the world. I have the strong feeling that most U.S. land managers are simply unaware of much of what goes on outside of our boundaries. I was humbled by the magnitude of the issues faced and the interest, sincerity, and dedication of nongovernmental organization (NGO) and government scientists and conservationists I met from such diverse places as Bhutan, Ecuador, Nepal, Pakistan, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda. From the importance placed on the definitions of IUCN protected area categories (virtually unrecognized by the U.S. land management agencies), to the emphasis on local community involvement in park management, to the struggles to make resource protection meaningful in the face of threats posed by extractive industries and even war, I found the international conservation movement to be largely disconnected from the issues that drive national park and forest managers in the U.S.

The dominant themes I heard at the Congress focused on the interface between science, resources management, and politics. There was abundant discussion about the number and size of protected areas around the world (generally attributed to now be as much as 10–12% of the Earth's surface), and the Congress included announcements of major new park designations in Brazil, Gabon, and Madagascar. But there was generally too little discussion of the distribution and effectiveness of existing protected areas. Elaborate studies of the importance and challenges of preserving biodiversity, including establishment of transfrontier protected areas and transnational corridors (e.g., the Meso-American biological corridor in Central America), were balanced by abundant discussion of sustainable

development and community involvement. These discussions were often heated, with ecologists claiming that the emphasis on sustainable development (often explained as essential to attract the funds necessary to support large conservation projects) has compromised some of the world's most valued natural resources (e.g., there was passionate debate over the negative impacts of large mining operations on the edges of tiger reserves in India). In addition, numerous sessions focused on issues related to cultural values and local community involvement, including the needs and rights of indigenous populations. Unfortunately, I found the lack of awareness (or sympathy) of some indigenous representatives to the biodiversity values that are critical to so many protected areas posed significant obstacles to the discussions needed to bring these diverse interests together.

Many in the United States are unaware of the extent to which international conservation efforts are dominated by NGOs, including Conservation International, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the World Wildlife Fund, Plant Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, and the Global Environment Facility. In Durban, the conservation interests of these organizations were often pitted against the reality of needing to attract the funding necessary to provide even minimal protection for established protected areas. This, no doubt, helps to explain the visible, although controversial, role at the Congress accorded to multinational extractive industries (e.g., Shell International, British Petroleum, and the International Council on Metals and Minerals were featured in a full plenary session).

Based on what I heard in Durban, it is my distinct impression that *the* major international conservation

issues of the coming decade will focus around the inevitable conflicts and compromises needed to balance (1) biodiversity needs with sustainable development interests, and (2) cultural values and the needs of local communities with ecological preservation. There was clearly a concern among many delegates that the growing influence of sustainable development and local uses threatens to over-ride the more traditional ecological values associated with many protected areas.

Given my special interest in wilderness (IUCN category 1b), I was particularly pleased to see the acceptance of a new IUCN Wilderness Task Force (WTF) under the auspices of the World Commission on Protected Areas. The WTF (<http://wtf.wild.org>) sponsored several organizational meetings as well as selected presentations during the Congress. Since wilderness has often been perceived as a largely Western construct, IUCN's acceptance of the wilderness concept is significant. It was also encouraging to hear commitments were made from representatives from the U.S. National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to support WTF's efforts to organize the 8th World Wilderness Congress, scheduled for September 2005, in Anchorage, Alaska.

The serious opportunities for information exchange and deliberations on the challenges and trade-offs facing the future of protected areas that dominated the Congress were gratefully broken by a series of cultural events (music, dance, food, and crafts) as well as opportunities to escape the confining atmosphere of Durban (a city of 2.5 million that was unsafe to wander about) on a variety of field trips. These provided valuable opportunities to visit the magnificent parks of KwaZulu-Natal as well as meet and mix with colleagues from

around the world (154 countries were represented among the over 3,000 participants). Despite its social challenges, South Africa provides a great role model for the world's efforts to protect its natural heritage.