

# PARKS RESPONSES



Traditional thatch being put on education facilities building in Kasungu National Park, Malawi © John E. Newby / WWF-Canon

## RESPONSE AND REACTION TO THE PAPER 'REVISITING LEOPOLD' FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL PARKS AND WILDLIFE

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The Department of National Parks and Wildlife is the Government's executive arm in Malawi mandated to conserve, manage and regulate the sustainable use of wildlife resources both in protected areas and outside protected. Malawi's wildlife estate comprises five national parks, four wildlife reserves and three nature sanctuaries that cover about 11.1 per cent of the total land area of the country.

Generally the overarching goal of the US National Park System of resource management, i.e. '*to steward NPS resources for continuous change that is not yet fully understood, in order to preserve ecological integrity and cultural and historical authenticity, provide visitors with transformative experiences, and form the core of a national conservation land- and seascape*', is similar in some aspects to the goals of wildlife conservation and management in the context of Malawi as provided in the wildlife policy and legislation. Our goals include the conservation and preservation of selected examples of biotic communities, protection of rare, endemic, and endangered species of wild plants and animals as well as providing for recreation and enjoyment through tourism among others.

However, the environmental, cultural and socioeconomic changes confronting the US National Park System are different to the conditions affecting the park management system in the context of Malawi. The loss of biodiversity generally through poaching and other illegal uses is attributed to livelihood needs especially of the surrounding local communities living adjacent to protected areas in addition to organised wildlife crime syndicates for international wildlife ivory illegal trade and other wildlife products. About 80 per cent of the local communities depend on natural resources for their livelihood and most of them around protected areas live below the poverty line. Furthermore, increasing human population densities around protected areas have exacerbated human-wildlife conflicts. Law enforcement is one of the major core functions of the Department to combat poaching and illegal trade. These issues are largely absent in the proposed actions to implement the policies.

The ecological principle of connectivity across broader land- and seascapes is essential for system resilience over time to support animal movements, gene flow, and response to cycles of natural disturbance. This has been embraced mostly through the transfrontier conservation approach of protected areas having an international boundary like the case of the Malawi Zambia Transfrontier Conservation Area. However, for intra-connectivity and establishment of networks within the country, this proves to be a challenge. Our country is small with high human population density coupled with increasing demand for land for agricultural production for livelihood even in marginal areas and settlement. The protected areas are islands of biodiversity hotspots in a sea of human populations.

The idea of recruiting communities near parks as co-stewards of national parks, to be empowered to take action to preserve and protect natural resources is a move in the right direction. One of the core functions of the Department is to involve local communities living close to protected areas as partners and beneficiaries in the ownership and management of wildlife through the promotion of the process of collaborative management. However, this approach should be coupled with a tangible incentive system for communities to effectively contribute to conservation otherwise it becomes a conversation with them.

The recommendation to significantly expand the role of science in the national park system in order to implement the resource management goals and policies is very relevant in the context of Malawi protected area management system. One of the core functions is

wildlife research and monitoring. There are designated research units with staff stationed in protected areas. The challenge has been to adequately train, equip, retain and support the career advancement of these research scientists and scholars.

On the systematic and comprehensive review of policies, it is an important strategic issue that should be addressed so that wildlife conservation and management is reflective of the current emerging issues. In the case of the Department, the current Wildlife Policy was adopted by Government in the year 2000. Over the years, there have been several emerging issues which have taken place within and outside the sector which have had an influence in the overall implementation of the current policy. For example the paradigm shift to involve the private sector in the conservation and management of protected areas. Private sector participation in the form of ecotourism concessions and protected area management concessions are the direction being undertaken by Government for economic growth. With limited Government financial resources to support protected areas, Public - Private Partnerships are one of the management strategies being employed, and therefore it is necessary that protected area managers have the requisite skills and knowledge.

Protected areas in Malawi are one of the vehicles for the revenue generation through tourism. This is not highlighted in the paper as one of the priority areas. The need for mineral exploration and extraction to boost the economy of the country has been increasing over the recent years. Protected areas are viewed as areas that have mineral deposits that can economically benefit the country. The wildlife legislation does not provide for such activities. It is important that as we move into the future, these issues are adequately addressed.