ECONOMICS AND GOVERNANCE OF WILDLIFE AND CONSERVATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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The University of Florida has a strong programme of graduate research linked to large conservation areas and communities in southern Africa. We have cultivated relationships based on pragmatic research that adds as much value locally as we derive from it though our PhDs and publications. This has allowed us to form strong partnerships with a number of key agencies in the region, so that we can integrate our research directly into practice, or what we call co-learning by co-doing.

With the Southern African Wildlife College, the USAID-funded RESILIM Project, Norwegian Higher Education for Development and WWF-South Africa we are working with key communities in Mozambique and South Africa to assess livelihoods and governance, and to then use this to start a process of governance reform. These communities are locked into a vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation, yet private wildlife conservationists and national parks earn ten to forty times more from the same land. Our hypothesis is that institutional reform can transform thee communities to to a positive and green development trajectory, based mainly on replacing top-down committee-based collective action with genuine participation, and also on stronger commercial relationships with the private sector to unlock the bio-experience economy, especially wildlife tourism, hunting and ecosystem services. We have had particularly successful partnerships with the private Sabi Game Reserve and Mangalana community, which is situated in Mozambique but on the Kruger border. This is a post conflict situation in which people struggle to feed themselves, have been disenfranchised from wildlife, and provide a safe passage for rhino poachers. Earlier this year, they received their first ever cash payments from wildlife as a result of our partnerships, and we will be repeating earlier surveys to see if and how attitudes and opportunities are shifting.

In Zambia, we have a partnership with The Nature Conservancy which, incidentally, employs several Florida alums – Patricia Mupeta and Jessica Musengezi. Here our goal is to develop livelihood and governance tracking tools so that we can measure the impact of conservation interventions on people's nutrition, health, production and associational capacity. We have introduced tablet computer technology to improve the accuracy and effectiveness of these surveys. Four Gators have played an important role in this process – Shylock Muyengwa and Leandra Clough in Zambia, and Antonieta Eguren and Alexander Sprague in the Makuleke community that owns part of Kruger National Park as part of their MDP practicum.

With surprisingly little academic interest in community micro-governance and protected area and wildlife economics, the demand for what we do is growing rapidly. Through partnerships with Southern African Wildlife College, Stellenbosch University and Copperbelt University in Zambia, we are working to translate our research in governance and economics into graduate level curricula. What is innovative is that we are avoiding the classroom, and are developing training courses where the participants are actively engaged in applying new skills to conservation and development programmes with a focus on communities in the buffer zones of the huge Kruger and Kafue National Parks.

With large amounts of donor money now being targeted at carbon, biodiversity and poverty in protected area buffer zones, we are positioning ourselves to provide the social technology (e.g. governance, economics, livelihood tracking) and other technology (e.g. satellite monitoring of deforestation and forest degradation) that is necessary if these investments are to be effective. The Global Environmental Fund for example has invested billions of dollars into biodiversity over the past two decades, and is keenly aware of the need for scientific evaluation of their projects, and the application of stronger science into project conceptualizing and design. Our goal is to bridge the gap between the immediacy of development assistance and the much slower cycles of scholarly consideration. The way we approach research through the co-learning by co-doing or transdisciplinary research process, is beginning to find traction with innovative agencies like UNDP's global biodiversity programme. Building these partnerships, and working in an interdisciplinary way is a comparative advantage that Florida has that in being increasingly appreciated by communities and development agencies.

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