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IS THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT BENEFITING AFRICAN WILDLIFE?

a book review of
*Game Changer: Animal Rights
and the Fate of Africa's Wildlife*
by Glen Martin

(University of California Press, 2012)

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Is the Animal Rights Movement Benefiting African Wildlife?

Probably nowhere else on earth are people as immersed culturally or as dependent economically on wildlife as sub-Saharan Africa. In recent decades, this has created an enormous controversy on how best to manage its diminishing wildlife resources.

Award-winning wildlife conservation journalist Glen Martin's book, *Game Changer: Animal Rights and the Fate of Africa's Wildlife*, is an eye-opening, in-depth analysis of this issue. In particular, he chronicles the ongoing struggle between modern, powerful, well-funded animal rights organizations— which insist on no-kill-under-any-circumstances wildlife conservation policies— and the traditional African attitude toward wildlife that allows trophy and sustenance hunting, culling, cropping, and destroying animals that damage crops or threaten the livelihood of humans. This includes killing some “charismatic” animals, such as elephants, lions, Cape buffalo, and other emblematic wildlife— which Westerners consider the heart and soul of Africa— in order to preserve sustainable populations.

As someone who is sympathetic to the welfare of wildlife, and strongly supportive of American conservation policies that promote biodiversity and protect threatened and endangered wildlife whenever possible, the idea of killing Africa's unique animals in order to ensure their survival seemed to me outrageous and scandalous until I read this book. Now I'm not so sure.

Two things make *Game Changer* particularly captivating. First, the author explores other critical (but related) problems that confront African nations, such as widespread government corruption; exploding population growth (a hundred million people in just the past decade); the enormous problem with poachers; the rapid

conversion of wilderness to cropland and pasture; widespread ecological damage to prime wildlife habitat due to intensive farming on semi-arid lands; and the persistence of anti-colonialism. The second unique feature of *Game Changer* is that the author does not rely on just statistics and research for his material. Rather, much of the book is comprised of interviews and conversations with individuals on the cutting edge of African wildlife conservation: governmental officials; rangers and wardens; NGO officials (nongovernment organizations that support modern animal-rights movements); and the owners of huge ranches, often with tens of thousands of acres.

The heart of *Game Changer*, however, zeroes in on the challenges facing African nations as they seek solutions on how best to manage their wildlife resources. Martin presents two firmly entrenched, but diametrically opposite, opinions on this. One is the traditional view of wildlife management, which allows the economic incentives of trophy hunting, culling, and cropping to keep animal populations under control and to produce a continuous revenue flow into national and private coffers. The second view is a total ban on killing all animals and to rely instead on *ecotourism* as the primary source of revenue from wildlife resources. Martin presents both sides of this controversy by investigating how it plays out primarily in Kenya (which bans any killing of animals) and Tanzania (which is pro-hunting).

Traditional Wildlife Management. The historic philosophy of wildlife management in sub-Saharan Africa is essentially pragmatic, and it still persists among most nations to this day (Kenya being the major exception). This strategy allows trophy and sustenance hunting as well as culling and cropping. According to proponents of this view, harvesting “megafauna” (large animals such as elephants) keeps their populations at a level the land can support, which in turn prevents environmental degradation. It also provides income from trophy hunting and animal byproducts, such as ivory. (The total cost of a safari in Tanzania could be more than a hundred thousand dollars for a trophy hunter [p. 107].)

Traditional wildlife management advocates also point out that hunting supplies large quantities of meat to villages, where protein shortages are endemic. Moreover, supporters claim, the profits from hunting, culling, and cropping give tribal communities economic incentives to tolerate living in proximity with wild animals—in particular elephants, which can quickly demolish farmland, and dangerous predators that sometimes prey on livestock.

Animal Rights–Motivated Wildlife Conservation. The second perspective on how best to manage Africa’s wildlife is to implement a total ban on killing *any* animals and to derive revenue from wildlife resources through ecotourism. The argument, as one proponent put it, goes like this: “While one thousand people can observe a herd of twelve hundred buffalos, only five people can reasonably hunt them” (68). Since much of the money funding this version of wildlife management comes from North American and European animal rights organizations, these groups have tremendous influence on governmental policies. But it’s a radical departure from Africa’s traditional approach of

consumptively utilizing wildlife resources. How this new ideological view of wildlife conservation came about is one of the most fascinating segments of the book.

The animal rights movement in Africa began in 1966 with the release of the Oscar-winning film *Born Free*, which changed the image of the African lion from a dangerous predator to a fascinating sentient creature “capable of receiving and reciprocating human affection” (12). *Born Free* (and its sequel *Living Free*) laid the foundation for a new conservation ethos that vilified killing Africa’s megafauna and fostered an “anthropomorphic” view of wildlife where *individual* animals were of great value and “not simply meat on the hoof” (97). This ultimately transformed the way people in the developed world viewed African wildlife—and it galvanized the animal rights movement in Africa.

It is true that these organizations have benefited African wildlife. In particular, they fund and support national and private parks and reserves, which are important reservoirs of wildlife. But on the down side, restricting megafauna to parks and reserves, while maintaining a total ban on hunting, has created areas with dreadful environmental deterioration. For example, if elephant populations are not controlled, they can trample landscapes, destroy rangeland, and so degrade local ecosystems that many other species decline.

So the question is, does the animal rights system of wildlife conservation work for Africa? Most of the experts Martin interviewed say no. Kenya has a ban on hunting, yet its wildlife populations have declined 70 percent since the law was implemented in 1977. In fact, according to the famous paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey—a former director of Kenya’s Wildlife Service—hunting has never stopped in Kenya, but there is more hunting in the nation today than any time since its independence (148).

There is another factor in the controversy over wildlife conservation in Africa, and it surfaces in many of Martin’s interviews. It may well be the determining factor of which wildlife policy is the best fit for African wildlife and its rural citizens.

The Pastoralists. Most of the wildlife conservationists Martin interviewed agree that the fundamental problem with the American and European version of animal rights-based wildlife conservation is that it neglects the poor, largely marginalized communities of pastoralists. Outside urban centers, millions of Africans live in small villages and subsist on nomadic pastoral livelihoods. Often these people survive on the threshold of starvation. They cannot afford to have elephants trample rangeland or lions prey on their livestock. Thus, pastoralists have little incentive to cooperate with wildlife agencies or to get on board with policies that seek to curtail hunting, grazing, and even poaching.

Ole Kaparo, a former speaker of the Kenyan parliament (and Maasai leader) sums up the problem bluntly: “The communities generally view wildlife as a problem....The people are prevented from benefiting from it in any way. They can’t hunt it. They can have trouble getting compensation when a lion kills their cattle....So the simple solution for the pastoralist is to eliminate wildlife completely. No wild

animals, no problem; they aren't killing your cows, they're not eating your grass, they're not spreading livestock diseases" (132).

The majority of the wildlife specialists Martin interviewed agree that without the commitment of these disenfranchised communities, the success of any wildlife conservation policy is highly problematic. Foreign animal rights organizations, says Kaparo, have become "the biggest hindrance in establishing any meaningful and effective wildlife policy. They have immense resources, and they use them to subvert the wholly legitimate rights of communities and landowners to use wildlife" (130). Richard Leakey agrees: "For conservation to succeed in Africa, you can't shove human rights aside for animal rights. Unfortunately, that's the impression [animal rights] groups are leaving—that an elephant or lion is worth more than a human being" (157).

In sum, the evidence seems to be that any wildlife management program that forbids hunting, culling, and cropping—and prevents pastoral and farming communities from benefiting economically—is doomed to failure. In fact, some argue that the pastoralists are the key to successful wildlife conservation in much of Africa. Martin explains: "Not only is pastoralism the defining lifestyle of East Africa; it is also the only lifestyle that hints at wildlife sustainability. Game can exist and even thrive in a pastoral culture, as long as human and livestock populations do not exceed the resource limitations imposed by the land" (85).

A Balanced View. The Bible clearly teaches that God provides for and values wildlife (see Job 38; 39; Ps. 104)—and instructed the human race to be His caretakers in creation (e.g., Ps. 8:6–8). It grieves me that populations of some African animals must be controlled by trophy hunting and culling. But Africa is not the Peaceable Kingdom of Isaiah 11. Nor are the parks and reserves in Africa like Yellowstone and other national parks in America. They are more than wildlife sanctuaries. Too many people in Africa depend on wildlife for sustenance and revenue. Like it or not, it seems evident to me after reading this book that successful wildlife management policies in Africa will require the consumptive use of wildlife through carefully controlled hunting, culling, and cropping—including even charismatic megafauna. If this can be done in a way that provides economic benefits to the millions of pastoralists and other tribal communities, who often live on the brink of starvation, it seems to me a responsible way to manage African wildlife. —*Dan Story*

Dan Story has an MA in Christian apologetics and is the author of many apologetic books, booklets, and articles. He has also written a book and more than thirty articles on wildlife. Dan explores the biblical perspective on nature and wildlife in his book *Should Christians Be Environmentalists?* (Kregel, 2012).