

REFLECTIONS FROM A MATURE STUDENT¹

When my large friend Hamish asked what I considered to be the greatest difference between myself and my student colleagues I replied about three hundred bottles of gin and a couple of thousand bottles of wine, give or take a case. All of which was prompted by my signing up for an MSc course at University College London at the tender age of well let us say in my early fifties.

I have led a really most agreeable life in eastern Africa as, I suppose, a sort of jobbing environmental scientist. After Oxford there was five years in the Serengeti, followed by ten years or so running my own environmental consulting group in Kenya, and then a few years at the United Nations Environment Programme. But after working for so many years in the general field of environment and development I had come to feel that many of the accepted doctrines of conservation were in need of a thorough overhaul. After all, depressingly little seemed to have come from all those years of hard work, fund raising, equipment, research, gold medals to Presidents, park rehabilitation programmes and training; to say nothing of the antics of the eco-glitterati of the international conservation circuit.

Consider, for example, the 200,000 or so animals hunted each year from the Serengeti - despite 30 or 40 years of anti-poaching efforts. Clearly there is a demand for the meat: but no one seems to have enquired why the livestock sector has not met the demand; because in development terms eating or selling a goat or cow is infinitely preferable to the dangerous occupation of sneaking into a national park and trying to kill a buffalo or a wildebeest. Or maybe hunting in the park allows more cows to be sold, or smuggled into neighbouring Kenya. The solution to "poaching", if there is one, lies here, in identifying and curing a market failure in the livestock sector; not in more anti-poaching patrols, village outreach education programmes, or the inane proposal to license the 200,000 animals to the hunters.

And how about all those wonderful tourist dollars that Kenya earns through its wildlife? Have a guess at (a) the proportion of those tourist dollars that can be attributed directly to wildlife, and (b) how much it costs Kenya to earn each of those dollars. Answer: around 40% and about \$1.06. And what are the forgone benefits to Kenya - the opportunity costs - from leaving the parks and reserves undeveloped? Answer: roughly double the tourist revenues, *and* the parks could accommodate two million Kenyans. Yet conservation wisdom will still have it that parks and

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reserves are an "economic" form of land use - which indeed they may be but certainly not for these reasons.

Answering any of these really very intriguing questions, let alone working out how to ask them, definitely required some deeper understanding of economics, so when Professor David Pearce offered me a corner in his Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment we decamped to London. Was there, we wondered, a life outside Africa and even outside the UN? Indeed there was.

At CSERGE I started the process of blowing 25 years of African dust from between the ears. I made some good contacts, read allot, and started a couple of papers about which my colleagues were suspiciously polite. But eventually it became quite clear that to get anywhere I had to bite the bullet. So with the greatest foreboding I signed up for the MSc course in environmental economics that Pearce runs at UCL.

May I say that taking on economics from scratch at the MSc level has been an enervating experience. As a warm up to the one year course we covered what seemed to be the complete math syllabus for a normal economics degree in nine, two-hour lectures -- stunning, literally. From then on it was just like Africa, one step forwards and two steps back, with the brain in a permanent eightsome reel. It also became abundantly clear that the brain was neither as fast and furious as once it was, nor as sticky - for facts flew in and out with seeming abandon. Why could I master the intricacies of discounting but not the theory of Pigouvian taxes? And learning was hard work. I was in couch potato mode by the end of the day while my fellow students were off where once I used to roam, and who knows even on occasions to the library.

And as for that vaunted wealth of accumulated experience from 25 years in the field, which we mature students are meant to rely on for some comparative advantage (i.e., to fudge our way through), well its a damn nuisance and it definitely gets in the way. To my younger colleagues, everything was there for the learning. For me, it all had to get past the defensive barriers of experience - those finer and finer filters which you set up against unwanted and unwelcome information. In the UN, where 99% of everything is rubbish, one would simply drown in verbiage without very fine filters indeed. But to see things in new ways and from new perspectives means you must break down your existing mental models to create new ones. Not so easy as the years slip by.

The essay also came as a bit of a shock. Now I can knock off pages of eco-babble for the UN with my eyes shut, and with a bit of effort I can turn out a quite acceptable scientific paper; but the essay left me floundering. And the worst part of all was trying to write again, I mean with one of those pen-type things. While our essays could be typed or printed the exam was hand

written, and after decades at the word processor the essential muscles and servo systems had atrophied totally. This was undoubtedly the greatest challenge of all: after 30 years to physically write twelve, one-hour exam answers.

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1000 words