

ADVOCACY

COVID-19: Conservation and tourism need greater support

Governments should establish environmental funds to cushion protected areas, revive tourism and provide a safety net for communities dependent on conservation.



PHOTO BY WIKIMEDIA

BY BENJAMIN MKAPA

As researchers and scientists study the novel coronavirus, you will find them reading lessons from the past. Africa is young and our past archives easily accessible. Grandfathers gather children to narrate traditional folktales and wise anecdotes they can pass on to their own children’s children. Last year, I wrote a memoir about my time as President of Tanzania from 1995 to 2005, though it was not just a tale of my past, but of my present and my vision for the future.

During my presidency, I knew that Tanzanians were ready to work to have better education, healthcare, roads, agricultural systems and, above all, a better life. I understood the importance of conservation and the implications of poor practices against nature. After my time in office, I have been compelled to

advocate for the protection of wildlife and wild lands. Participating in discussions with others continues to teach me the inter-connections of industries and the importance of mainstreaming conservation into all sectors of the economy.

As humanity, we must start to see nature as our insurance policy against diseases like COVID-19. The disease lays bare the consequences of neglecting nature and thinking that human health and economic development are separate from it. It is healthy biodiversity and ecosystems that provide us with food, medicines, wood energy and water.

Conservation should be viewed as an investment that can create jobs, support livelihoods and reduce the costs of reacting to pandemics like COVID-19. African governments must recognise that conservation is an important pillar of economic development. They need to acknowledge that the livelihoods of rural communities are directly

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The COVID-19 pandemic will most likely have significant impacts on wildlife conservation, most of which we will only be able to assess in the longer term. The most immediate of these impacts is the disruption of conservation funding, e.g. from wildlife tourism.

connected to nature, local food production systems and biomass energy.

Environmental emergency funds

The response to the pandemic by most African governments has been urban-focused since it is cities that tend to be coronavirus hotspots. The threat to rural areas and nature including protected areas has received little attention. States have tried to provide safety nets and economic support for business and services like health and water. But nature-



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based sectors such as environmental conservation and tourism are not receiving the same help. Governments should establish environmental emergency funds to cushion protected areas, revive the tourism sector, and provide a safety net for communities dependent on conservation.

It is predicted that COVID-19 will hit African economies hard. The best case scenario is a growth reduction from 3.9 per cent to 0.4 per cent. The worst case scenario is a growth rate of -5 per cent. The World Bank has said Africa's economies will collectively face their first recession in 25 years.

In the face of this, we must come together. Collaboration between nations is not as evident as it should be. Many responses have been about standing independently and protecting borders.

But we have been working together to stop crimes such as Illegal Wildlife Trade and recorded better results when doing so. We need this same collaborative approach again. I applaud the East African Business Council for creating a regional platform for the private sector to combat the pandemic. They aim to complement the efforts of governments, the East Africa Community, the African Union and development partners in information sharing, best practices

and monitoring the economic impact of COVID-19 in a bid to bring forward solutions to boost intra-regional trade. This approach is a step in the right direction and a model that should be replicated across Africa. Remember, we are only as strong as our weakest link.

The time to shift course

Whilst challenges remain, the pandemic presents huge opportunities for our continent. We should reflect on existing wildlife management and biodiversity conservation models. Some of these have served conservation well. One example is the significant investment made to protect endangered species and stop trade in illegal wildlife products. This also reduces interactions between people and wildlife, as hunting, transportation and preparation of wildlife products is reduced. COVID-19 has revealed that illegal wildlife trade can raise the risk of human-wildlife proximity. Commitment to address illegal wildlife trade needs reaffirmation, enforcement and additional funding across all countries.

Africa's protected area network also needs to be strengthened. While I commend governments for their commitment to establish these parks, most are grossly underfunded

and rely on NGOs to assume the responsibility for management. These protected areas are home to iconic species that attract tourists as well as other species that are essential for the resilience of these areas. They are the nucleus of Africa's wildlife-based tourism that provides direct and indirect employment, including business opportunities for small and medium-scale entrepreneurs. Given their importance to conservation and economies, governments need to demonstrate a sense of ownership and provide much needed funding.

African leaders now more than ever have the greatest power to shift the course of their countries with new policies. The lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is that there are significant costs associated with undervaluing our biodiversity and ecosystems, and that separating economic development from nature is a false choice. We need to strive for greater harmony between our economic models of growth and nature.

We are on a pathway to a sustainable and resilient future where nature is centre stage. However, we can only rise if we do it right. If we set our priorities right, have the resolve to rise, and present a united front. This is consistent with the spirit of Agenda 2063 ("The Africa we want") and my advocacy for the inclusion of the statement that Africa must have the means "to drive its own development, with sustainable and long-term stewardship of its resources and where Africa's unique natural endowments, its environment and ecosystems, including its wildlife and wild lands are healthy, valued and protected, with climate resilient economies and communities." ●

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