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What We Need is a Community Bambi: The Perils and Possibilities of Powerful Symbols

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While it is commonplace to talk about university professors as living in some sort of theoretical ivory tower disconnected from the “real world”, serious scholars of rural development actually spend a great deal of time living in the very real rural village world of maize meal, mud and malaria. This chapter explores the perils of a different kind of disconnection--assumptions about symbols that have deep meanings in our own popular culture. This is important because the concepts and misconceptions of popular culture can and do drive political decisions.

I learned this the hard way when I was plunged into the world of Congressional politics and op ed writing after a colleague brought me a copy of an editorial<sup>1</sup> from the *San Francisco Examiner* (April 14, 1997) entitled “Elephant Killers”. The editorial was the result of a Humane Society of the United States (hereinafter HSUS) campaign to end USAID (United States Agency for International Development) funding for a Zimbabwe program for village control of natural resources, especially wild animals, which is known by the acronym CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources).

For me, community was a powerful symbol. When Marshall Murphree (this volume) talks about communities, a warm and fuzzy picture flashes into my mind of him joking

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<sup>1</sup> One of the more shocking aspects of this whole experience was my realization that when a newspaper takes a stand in an editorial, it does not necessarily mean that any one has bothered to check the facts. They certainly had not in this case.

with Chief Kanyurira of the CAMPFIRE village of Masoka. I suspect that most field-oriented people also respond at some level to the invocation of community with some personal reference point--people in a place where we have lived and worked. That community matters is self evident to people with such experience in rural communities. But assuming that communities are a similarly powerful symbol for everyone can have negative consequences for our ability to spread our models of community resource management. Nowhere has this been more clear to me than in the course of countering the HSUS campaign against CAMPFIRE.

This chapter proceeds in three parts woven around the story of my own involvement. I begin with a brief description of the CAMPFIRE program. Second, I present three anti-CAMPFIRE editorials and analyze the underlying stories on which they rely. Third, I explore the missing story of community and the implications of its absence.

### **CAMPFIRE**

Starting in the late 19th century, European settlers in present-day Zimbabwe seized most of the best land, forcing African residents onto small patches of poor quality, poorly watered land which have been known by various names over time. They are currently called Communal Areas. In 1989 the Zimbabwean government instituted a program under which proprietary rights over wildlife which heretofore had been vested in the state were devolved to "appropriate local authorities" in the Communal Areas in the same way that they had effectively been devolved to white commercial farmers under the white settler government's 1975 Parks and Wildlife Act. Under the CAMPFIRE program rural villages were able to manage their own wildlife including making arrangements with safari operators to bring in hunters and photographers. CAMPFIRE has had its ups and downs, but at its best it has provided villagers with cash income and wild animals with protection from poaching. (Cf. Murphree this volume, Murphree and Hulme 2001.)

### **The Anti-CAMPFIRE Editorials**

The first editorial I saw was in the April 24, 1997 issue of the *San Francisco Examiner* . It featured a drawing of a rather droopy elephant and the subhead, “The U.S. spends millions of dollars to promote the hunting and slaughter of pachyderms in a corrupt program in Zimbabwe.” It read as follows:

When we see elephants perform in the circus or caged in the zoo, compassion for the treatment of these extraordinary beasts prompts us to ask about the conditions of their servitude and confinement.

Perhaps we should begin now to ask about how millions of U.S. tax dollars are spent on a program in Africa that promotes the ultimate form of mistreatment--the slaughter of elephants for fun and profit.

For the well-to-do elephant killers, the fun consists of arriving in Zimbabwe with the proper bush jacket and an artillery piece known as a Buffalo Hunter .458 rifle. In Matabeleland, the brave hunter stands at a prudent distance, pulls the trigger and bruises his affluent shoulder with recoil. He proudly sees a huge bullet smack into the brain of a 40-year-old bull elephant with tusks of trophy length. The hide goes to makers of briefcases and shoes; the meat, to crocodile farmers; the money, to government officials.

For Zimbabwe, the profit comes from enormous fees paid by trophy hunters and the \$7 million that U.S. taxpayers have contributed since 1989 to promote the killing of elephants.

Another \$20 million has been allocated in the next four years. The money from the U.S. Agency for International Development is invested in a Zimbabwe project cutely called CAMPFIRE, or Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources. In other words, elephant killing by rich tourists.

The Humane Society of the United States went to Congress last month and begged the Senate subcommittee on foreign operations to stop spending taxpayer funds to kill elephants, which are listed as threatened by the Endangered Species Act (half of Africa's elephants have been killed in the last two decades by poachers, hunters and ivory merchants.)

Naturally, government officials in Zimbabwe regard American concern for elephants as an arrogant intrusion on the affairs of a nation with major economic problems. At the same time, however, the Humane Society points out that \$600,000 in U.S. funds have financed lobbying to remove elephants from the Endangered Species Act. The lobbyists also want resumption of international trade in ivory, which has been banned since 1989.

What's more, the Humane Society presented the Senate with abundant documentation of waste, corruption and mismanagement in how the CAMPFIRE program actually operates in Zimbabwe. Although profits

from trophy hunting were supposed to go to rural villagers, an audit by U.S. officials shows the local folks get about 11 percent.

We can't do much about Zimbabwe, but the Congress certainly can bring a halt to the spending of U.S funds for the slaughter of elephants for the benefit of wealthy hunters who hope that big guns will make up for any personal shortcomings.

If you agree, send a note to Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. Tell them to douse CAMPFIRE.

This had been preceded by an editorial, "Save the African Elephants" in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (18 April, 1997):

At a time when African elephants are in precipitous decline, Congress is considering funding a foreign aid program in Zimbabwe that would encourage trophy hunting of pachyderms to provide economic benefits to rural villages.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) is seeking \$21 million to fund the Zimbabwe-based Communal Area Management Program for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), an outfit that is aggressively promoting elephant hunting as it seeks to lift the ban on the ivory trade and weaken the Endangered Species Act.

Because of the value of ivory tusks, poachers in the 1970s and 1980s wantonly massacred elephants, cutting the population in half from 1.3 million in 1979 to only 600,000 by 1989 when international trade in ivory

was outlawed. Still, elephants continue to be hunted to the edge of extinction.

The Humane Society of the United States, the nation's largest animal protection organization, opposes CAMPFIRE--arguing that American taxpayers should not pay for a mismanaged, corrupt, and cruel program that encourages even more slaughter of endangered elephants.

We join the Humane Society in urging the House and Senate to withhold AID funding from CAMPFIRE, and redirect the \$21 million to African villages, where the money could be invested in more humane, profitable, and environmentally sound projects.

Finally, on May 8, columnist, Peter Rowe, in the *San Diego Union Tribune* (Rowe 1997) in a piece entitled "Stampeding Toward Ivory and Irony" used the CAMPFIRE controversy to fire a political shot across the bow of a local congressman.

Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham is a crucial vote in an upcoming showdown, one heavy with irony and ivory.

From where I sit, the issue before the Escondido Republican could not be simpler. Should the United States give millions to a foreign outfit that attacks U.S. policy? Of course not.

No-brainers, though, often befuddle our Capitol Hill brain trust.

CAMPFIRE, a Zimbabwe group dedicated to the dubious propositions that the world needs more dead elephants and rhinos, could have had Cunningham playing political Twister.

CAMPFIRE has spent \$7 million in U.S. foreign aid. Now, it wants \$20 million more.

The Duke hates foreign aid.

But CAMPFIRE is backed by Safari Club International.

For a while, it looked like Cunningham was caught on the horns and tusks of a dilemma. No longer.

### **Aid Allergy**

For months, the Humane Society of the United States had tried to pin down the Duke's position. This week, I tried to do the same. Yesterday, his office made this statement:

“He supports CAMPFIRE because it is a smart and effective conservation program.”

Much about the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources is open to debate, but this much is clear:

CAMPFIRE wants to overturn the global ban on ivory and rhino-horn trading.

“The CAMPFIRE Association maintains its position that marketing of our natural resources including legally obtained ivory and rhino horn should be allowed,” the in-house *CAMPFIRE News* reported in June 1995.

Since 1989, Congress has opposed this trade, arguing that it nearly wiped out the rhino and African elephant. CAMPFIRE is unimpressed.

“CAMPFIRE fights to change American law,” *CAMPFIRE News* editorialized in December 1995. “The United States Endangered Species Act (ESA) negatively impacts on sustainable development and conservation programmes in Southern Africa.”

This fight is waged by an army of lobbyists attached to a CAMPFIRE affiliate. Lobbyists that you and I hired at \$635,000 last year, and \$546,000 this year.

American taxpayers are funding a group that battles American interests. CAMPFIRE supporters call this “free speech.”

CAMPFIRE wants to speak freely? Be my guest. But don’t ask me to buy the megaphone.

### **Tragic Stampede**

This could have been where the Duke, the Humane Society and I agreed. While he is the co-chair of the Congressional Sportman’s Caucus, Cunningham is allergic to foreign aid.



The Duke has “two political agenda items in conflict,” Wayne Pacelle, Humane Society vice president for government affairs, said earlier this week. “His opposition to foreign aid and his support of trophy hunting.”

But that conflict is over. And the Duke may have joined the winning side. CAMPFIRE doesn’t lack allies on Capitol Hill and even within environmental circles.

The World Wildlife Fund, for instance, argues that CAMPFIRE encourages the sellers of ivory and rhino horn to protect their “suppliers”, the elephants and rhinos.

But we’ve stampeded down this path before, with tragic results. Between 1979 and 1989, the ivory trade halved the African elephant population and the rhino-horn market killed off 90 percent of the world’s rhinos.

Why resume a hunt that costs so many dollars and makes so little sense?

### **Popular Beliefs and Powerful Symbols: Editorial Stories that Tell Themselves**

Obviously, there is no “the” CAMPFIRE story. There are serious critiques of CAMPFIRE and possible CAMPFIRE futures ( see Murphree, this volume, Murombedzi, 1994; Hill, 1996, Hughes, 2001), But these thoughtful critiques were not the basis of the HSUS attack. Rather, as the previous quotes indicate, the HSU position was based on scenarios of corruption, slaughter, and extinction. The portrayal of CAMPFIRE was so

grotesque, I felt obliged to try to tell a different CAMPFIRE story to Congress and the public.

My efforts took two forms-- trying to get op ed pieces into the newspapers where hostile editorials had been printed and mobilizing a pro-CAMPFIRE letter writing campaign. I quickly discovered that people who had worked at the community level, particularly overseas, immediately “got it”. For them the word “community” had meaning, a meaning that encompassed livelihoods and knowledge and governance. They assumed that African communities were inhabited by sentient, responsible human beings just like themselves. For others the idea was more difficult to grasp.

I came to the realization that the conflict here was not over presentation of fact although that was an issue.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the strength of all three editorials (and the campaign that begat them) lies in implicit appeals to prevailing beliefs about Africa and to powerful environmental symbols that make their message almost a foregone conclusion.

**Africa is Africa: The Power of Popular Beliefs:**<sup>3</sup> One of the first things I tell students in my freshman seminar on environment and conservation in sub Saharan Africa is that

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<sup>2</sup> The editorials suffered from too many inaccuracies and significant omissions to detail in this chapter which is not intended to be a point for point rebuttal. For just one example, the *Examiner* editorial alleges that only 11 percent of trophy hunting receipts go to villagers. There have indeed been instances (as revealed by critical research built into the CAMPFIRE program, conducted by Zimbabweans and acted upon by the program) in which the major share of profits were retained by the District Council (Murombedzi 1994). However, aggregate figures tell a different story. Between 1989 and 1996, roughly 59 percent of the total wildlife revenue received at the district level went to the subdistrict level (Bond, nd: 1-2). Similarly, these editorials omit any discussion of the apparent decrease of elephant deaths from poaching due to the vigilance of village wildlife managers.

<sup>3</sup> My assessment of popular beliefs about Africa comes from 25 years of reading the popular press and teaching about, writing about, and discussing Africa with a wide spectrum of people.

there is no language called “African” and that there are over 50 nation-states and at least 2000 languages<sup>4</sup> on the continent. This is usually an enormous revelation to most of them. All three of the anti-CAMPFIRE editorials start from the implicit assumption common in the United States that Africa is a single, homogenous and rather dire place (see Roe, 1999: 4-8). By evoking misleading prevailing beliefs about Africa, the editorial writers set the reader up to believe a negative story about CAMPFIRE.

For example, these editorials tap into a common belief that most if not all African governments are shot through with corruption. So the *Examiner's* (incorrect) statement that “the Humane Society presented the Senate with abundant documentation of waste, corruption and mismanagement in how the CAMPFIRE program actually operates in Zimbabwe”, resonates with the image of Corrupt-Africa, even though corruption in Africa varies in its form and its intensity not only from country to country but among government departments and levels of government just as it varies from state to state, county to county, and city to city in the US<sup>5</sup>.

The assumption that “Africa is Africa” extends to wildlife as well. Thus, these editorial writers appear to have assumed that it is possible to talk in aggregate terms about “the” African elephant when there are actually several sub-species of African elephants (*Loxodonta Africana*) including *L. africana africana*, the bush sub-species, and *L. a. cyclotis*, the forest sub species. There are recognized differences among widely separated African elephant populations from the large desert elephants of Namibia on down. In addition, the fate of one population does not necessarily reflect the fate of all

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<sup>4</sup>Personal Communication, Larry Hyman, Department of Linguistics, University of California at Berkeley, 1998.

<sup>5</sup>And one could obviously come to the conclusion that these editorial writers too believe in Corrupt-Africa even though they all live in state known for corrupt politics.

(Getz 1998, Jeheskle 1992). Thus, the statement that the total number of African elephants was halved between 1979 and 1989 (*San Francisco Chronicle 1997*) does not necessarily mean that all populations were halved. While some elephant populations are clearly in danger, the Zimbabwean elephant populations are not among them. To the contrary, a study of the four main elephant regions of Zimbabwe showed that all four had experienced increases in the elephant populations between 1980 and 1995 and that the national population had increased by 2.2 percent per annum “despite population reduction exercises” (Price Waterhouse 1996: ii-iii). But the Africa-is-Africa mindset made it easy for these editorials to mislead readers by implying that aggregate African elephant figures accurately reflect the state of elephants in Zimbabwe.

### **Elephant as Big Bambi: The Power of Symbols**

Elephants are rapidly becoming the African equivalent of Bambi, just a lot bigger<sup>6</sup>. It can be argued that many Americans are moved by a discourse of nature, a set of meanings, which are exemplified by the popular wildlife television shows. Their vision of Africa is a vast savanna inhabited<sup>7</sup> by majestic wild animals or a rain forest in whose mists gorillas frolic. We see every aspect of animal life--how and what they eat, their mating rituals, their incredibly cute babies (of which, the shows often suggest, there are too few), the intricacies of their social organization in aesthetically pleasing, sometimes breath-taking footage. That these films are positioned as apolitical educational programs adds to their power<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>What the role of Dumbo is in all this, I would not venture to guess.

<sup>7</sup> When I gave the talk on which this chapter is based, I nearly said “peopled” instead of inhabited. The slip is instructive.

<sup>8</sup> The power of the mass media to shape the meaning of nature can be seen in the fact that the murders of refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo/Zaire were repeatedly reported as occurring not in the precious and pristine rain forest, but in the *jungle*. (see also Slater 1994, Slater 2000)

And where is community in this elephant as Big Bambi presentation of nature? Where is contemporary culture? Not on the map- literally. For example, the map of Kenya depicted on a t.v. wild animal program is devoid of all human institutions, dotted instead with representations of animals, mountains and lakes. Not in the films--here people serve as exotic background: dancing warrior/waiters clad in “traditional” dress<sup>9</sup> and pastoralists drinking blood. All too often villagers in these films are not portrayed as having any particular livelihood (unless they are poachers) nor knowledge that should be taken seriously nor do they make decisions, certainly not about wildlife. They do, however, the shows often imply, have too many babies.

Animal rights activists tap into this powerful discourse and turn it against our models. In this discourse CAMPFIRE is symbolized not by little children walking safely (instead of through a forest filled with fierce buffaloes) to the new elementary school in Masoka, but by the palpable horrors of a dying elephant. Its power to persuade is reflected in the vehement assertion of a very well educated person, “I saw a program on elephants. They are very intelligent, maybe more intelligent than we are. Killing elephants is just like Hitler’s killing the Jews.”

I must state here that I personally find trophy hunting grotesque. And I suspect that even the most avid trophy hunter would agree that a dying animal is not a pretty sight. But neither is a child gored by a buffalo or suffering from malnutrition a pretty sight. This brings us to the problem of the missing story.

### **The Missing Story**

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes “traditional dress” is indeed traditional, sometimes it is an odd pastiche of what tourists think “Africans” wear.

In contrast to the richness of the portrayals of animal life, human communities and their relationship to wildlife have little symbolic or emotional impact when the topic is nature<sup>10</sup>. Thus, these three editorials never turn their gaze toward the realities of life in many CAMPFIRE sites. Three omissions are particularly worth noting.

The first is the limits on the possibility of any livelihood, let alone a sustainable one in many CAMPFIRE areas. Many CAMPFIRE villages are located on the least fertile, most poorly watered land in remote areas where the possibility of even a subsistence livelihood from arable agriculture is often uncertain. For many households the only possibility of even a poverty level livelihood lies in sending male members off to work as wage laborers far from home. Thus, the well-intentioned suggestion of the *San Francisco Chronicle* that \$21 million should be sent “to African villages, where the money could be invested in more humane, profitable, and environmentally sound projects” reveals an ignorance of the scarcity of development projects that work anywhere, let alone in such remote, resource-poor areas.

The second part of the missing story is the human cost of wildlife. For most African villagers (and here the continent-wide generalization is probably appropriate), an elephant is less like Bambi and more like an enormous hairless rat that destroys crops, raids and ruins granaries, and sometimes takes a human life. Buffaloes are extremely dangerous and, like giraffes, have a fondness for cotton plants. Hippos have voracious appetites and are dangerous both in the water and on land. And so the story goes for a variety of animals. Without CAMPFIRE, villagers have every reason to kill these animals or to turn a blind eye when outside poachers do so.

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that photos of starving babies are used with powerful effect in famine and refugee stories. But these photos never appear in the context of a “nature” story. The symbol is powerful but it doesn’t travel well.

The third part of the missing story is the transformation of human-wildlife interactions. CAMPFIRE transforms the villagers' "pests" into a source of cash, thus making it worth people's while to protect wildlife habitat and to protect the animals themselves from poachers, both local and outsiders<sup>11</sup>. It provides a modicum of protection from elephants and other dangerous animals in the form of solar-powered electric fences. At its most successful it can make a local school or clinic or maize mill possible.

The missing community story just doesn't tell as well as the nature story. Killing a charismatic elephant is a clear and awful sin of commission. This story is clear and compelling. Whereas omitting to take local people with no compelling image into account doesn't weigh very much on the sin scale. This story is, at best, fuzzy.

### **Creating a Community Bambi**

Trying to spread models of community management of natural resources can catapult us into arenas (such as US politics) where our story of community has no valence and where hostile counter stories of nature hold sway. If implementing our models depends on bilateral aid or the content of international treaties such as the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species or reining in the excesses of international capital in the ecotourism boom, we must identify both the people who influence decisions and the discourses that influence them. We must find ways to share our view of human communities. Pointing out the racist and colonialist underpinnings of much nature discourse is not persuasive to those who would not practice overt racism in their personal interactions and who have a "man the lifeboats" sense of emergency about the fate of nature. Rather we must find ways to make human communities and their links with wild communities compelling,

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<sup>11</sup> Encouraging data suggesting that elephant deaths from poaching have declined significantly with the advent of CAMPFIRE must be viewed with caution since accurate poaching data are hard to come by.

appealing and self evident. Masoka, Zimbabwe and Bawa, Mozambique must evoke the same warmth and, indeed, the same powerful sentimentality as Bambi. If we can't create a community Bambi, our chances of spreading our models of community natural resource management are going to be very slim indeed.



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