Letter

P be a deba es d e c se a a d e a z ac

The biannual Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute (TAWIRI) conference in Arusha is a science policy event where ideas about conservation science and practice in Tanzania and beyond are exchanged. At the 2015 conference, I learned through event ethnography (Brosius & Campbell 2010) how the paradigmatic crisis narrative of the so-called war on poaching shaped debates and created a sense of urgency to save elephants and other flagship species, which pushed certain topics and perspectives to the forefront and marginalized others.

Considerable time was spent emphasizing that poaching is an organized-crime phenomenon. Conference participants agreed that the war on poaching needs to be fought in rural communities, amidst high-level government networks, and in global ivory markets. However, such a framing of the issue precludes wider debates about the tensions and contradictions in conservation practice. Who are the poachers and why do they risk their lives to hunt illegally in the first place? Can militarized antipoaching strategies have unintended negative spillover effects on rural people who are not involved in poaching? Can these effects undermine our conservation and development efforts? Such questions would inevitably spark controversies because the war-on-poaching narrative and approach cannot provide answers to such complex and pertinent questions.

The significance of wildlife-based tourism for Tanzania's national economy, 18% of the gross domestic product (GDP), was a key message at the conference; it generated praise and reminded participants of the importance of wildlife for economic growth and development. However, the other 82% of GDP remained unmentioned in conference presentations. Tourism's contribution to the national economy was not discussed relative to other economic sectors that can be in direct competition with tourism-based land use, such as commercial and subsistence agriculture and use of environmental goods in rural livelihoods. It would be worthwhile to compare different economic activities and how the state is managing competing sectors within society. Are agriculture and livestock contributing more or less than conservation? Are these activities appropriately acknowledged in economic statistics, or do they largely go unnoticed (Behnke & Muthami 2011)? What about opportunity costs of conservation (Norton-Griffiths & Southey 1995)? Do ecotourism and conservation activities on communal lands actually generate the promised benefits to rural communities who bear the brunt of conservation costs? Although I am not suggesting that one sector should be prioritized over another, such questions would problematize a single number (18%) that tends to depoliticize the ongoing struggles between conservation, tourism, and rural development.

In a session on wildlife censuses, participants had an open debate on how to improve detection quality, consistency, and collaboration between scientists and managers of protected areas (PAs). It was acknowledged that there is a problem with communicating findings to the media and politicians because of the lack of accuracy and the complex statistics behind census results. However, the discussion failed to problematize the political pressure to deliver positive results that are expected by government authorities, who are under growing pressure to sell success (Büscher 2014) to a global conservation and donor community (Arusha Times 2015; NatGeo 2015).

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droughts or other environmental stressors responsible? Are people pushed into PAs by land-based conflicts? Is a combination of these factors driving change? Rather than discussing possible causes of social–environmental change, many participants jumped straight to blaming rural residents for illegal and criminal behavior, thereby invoking a militant response in line with the narrative of a war on poaching.

In 2008, Bram Büscher (2008) published an editorial in *Conservation Biology* reflecting on the 2007 Society for Conservation Biology conference. There he pointed to a lack of debate (i.e., a consensus that silenced critique) that resulted from the neoliberalization of the field. In 2015 things have not changed in a similar but regional conference, albeit under different political circumstances. The growing international pressure on government officials to wage a war on poaching (EIA 2013) peaked in 2014 when results of the most recent elephant

Conservation Biology, Volume 00, No. 0, 1–2
© 2016 Society for Conservation Biology
DOI: 10.1111/cobi.12751

census produced a powerful crisis narrative that was embraced by conservationists across academia, nongovernmental organizations, and government. Crisis narratives need an epistemic community that can promote the key message and give it institutional legitimacy. In Tanzania, conservation is still the academic and professional domain of conservationists who engage in conservation. Social scientists, who study conservation as a social practice, remain a rare species.

Although Büscher's (2008) observations still hold—lack of debate and instead a dominant consensus on key questions that deserve open and controversial debates—the intellectual climate is different in 2015 in Tanzania. The global and national war-on-poaching narrative has produced a hegemonic paradigm that suggests how to think about and act upon conservation in Tanzania. This consensus in science and policy does little to promote conservation policies and practices that consider human needs and social impacts. Under such conditions, the costs of conservation are continuously placed mainly on rural residents who happen to live where conservation is enacted, which can perpetuate social injustices (Brockington 2004). From an instrumental point of view, such approaches may also be counterproductive to conservationists' long-term goals (Duffy et al. 2015) because they delegitimize conservation among people who on a daily basis must choose to live with wildlife or let it die.

Ac ed e s

Funding to attend the conference was provided by PIMA (NERC project number NE/L00139X/1) and the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) program. The ESPA program is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

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