



On war and peace, people and parks

by

James K. Gasana

Swiss Organization for Development and Cooperation
(Intercooperation)

Maulbeerstrasse 10; CH-3001, Switzerland

jgasana@intercooperation.ch

(Article published in Tropical Forest Update, volume 13, Number 2, 2003. See also under www.itto.or.jp. Tropical Forest Update is published by the International Tropical Timber Organization)

IN the 1990s, Rwanda, the country of my birth, was torn by an armed conflict that culminated in genocide in 1994. From 1990 to 1993, I was a minister in the Rwandan government, first of Agriculture and Environment and then of Defence, giving me a close-hand view of the effects of armed conflict on the environment. The conflict's battlegrounds included Rwanda's two national parks, Akagera in the east along the border with Tanzania, and Volcanoes in the north along the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) and Uganda. Both were created under the Belgian colonial administration; Volcanoes National Park was part of a tri-border gorilla protection area in Rwanda, DRC and Uganda while, in contrast, Akagera was not part of any such scheme.

It is instructive to assess the status of these two parks in the aftermath of the genocide. Despite the damage caused to the gorilla habitat in Volcanoes National Park by fighting in 1991 and by refugee pressure in 1994 and after, and despite the absence of transboundary cooperation between Rwanda, Uganda and the DRC in the latter part of the 1990s, the gorillas continue to survive. I believe this is due largely to cooperation between protected area managers and conservation authorities in the three countries before and after the genocide, which created a political imperative to protect the mountain gorillas, avoid major damage to their habitats and maintain the integrity of park boundaries.

The situation is quite different in Akagera. After the regime change in Rwanda in 1994, more than half the park was converted to pastoral land and used for the settlement of returnees. This resulted in the loss of wildlife populations, including the local extinction of the lion. I strongly believe that if there had been a contiguous protected area at the border, with a cooperative conservation program between Rwanda and Tanzania, the destruction of Akagera could have been limited, if not avoided.

The contrasting fates of the two national parks is evidence that transboundary cooperation can combine biodiversity conservation, peace and stability, and the needs of people, even in appalling circumstances. They also show that we cannot ignore the risks of border instability and tensions on biodiversity conservation in transboundary ecosystems.

The case of Rwanda also clearly illustrates how the protection of valuable habitats near international borders requires a distinctive approach. In many cases, such habitats face conservation and development challenges due to the especially vulnerable nature of their often-untapped resources. They may face a diversity of threats from, for example, illegal mining, illegal logging, wildlife poaching and the trade of products thereof, or from war and the refugees it generates. In Africa, security and environmental concerns are strongly intertwined due to the cross-border movements of refugees and rebels in countries like DRC and Sierra Leone. Transboundary conservation could play an essential role in minimising such threats by allowing the coordination of the efforts of the countries concerned.

Transboundary conservation is not a new concept. Experience has shown that positive international cooperation for biodiversity conservation can promote peace and friendship through constructive dialogue and can strengthen mutual arrangements for sustainable development and stability in border regions. The settlement of the Ecuadorian-Peruvian border conflict (see [article](#)) provides an illustrative example of this. After settling their territorial dispute, Ecuador and Peru established a peace park in the Sierra del Condor comprising two contiguous areas on both sides of their border; ITTO is supporting these parks through two projects.

Biodiversity conservation cannot lead to lasting peace based only on an understanding between governments; borderland peoples must also be willing participants. Real peace at the border is lived as a day-to-day experience and will be rooted in the cohesiveness of customary social, cultural and economic exchanges between border societies. Many transboundary initiatives may not lead to such a peace. Very often they are top-down driven, involving one government department in each country for the negotiations and implementation and failing at the outset to overcome national institutional boundaries. The reality at the borders is that the space for the interaction of border societies does not correspond to the space under state control. In the former, a dynamic of integration exists based on sociocultural interactions, economic networks and, often, transboundary ethnic solidarities. Ideally, transboundary conservation initiatives should arise from a movement that is close to the border region's grassroots or which can take on board actors who are close to the grassroots of those regions.

Thus, transboundary conservation as a form of governance of natural resources needs further conceptualising. It should be seen as a larger concept that embraces the comprehensive development of borderlands and aims to change policies to create an environment conducive to the collective emancipation of border societies. Transboundary conservation could be the basis for the construction of a new role for the border in which it is perceived less in terms of military defence and more as a meeting place between nations (and grassroots communities) for dialogue, cooperation, positive exchange and joint development planning.

Achieving this, however, presents an enormous challenge. In addition to safeguarding biodiversity, there is the multi-faceted challenge of making conservation, peace and peoples' development truly interactive. There is also the challenge of departing from vertical, top-down transboundary conservation initiatives to involve civil society and other non-governmental actors who are close to the borderlands' grassroots. And the

biggest challenge is to overcome the dominant political culture, which in many cases is characterised by a rigid concept of sovereignty.

Making conservation and peace interactive

Why would political leaders choose transboundary conservation as an approach to engineering peace? In my view there are four main arguments:

1. The creation of TBCAs is based on a recognition of environmental interdependence between neighbour countries; politicians who are convinced that the boundaries of ecological functions or problems do not always (and in fact rarely) correspond to international boundaries will see the need for a transboundary approach to natural resource management;
2. transboundary conservation can be a cost-effective way of solving transborder problems before they become a source of border tension and regional instability. Drawing on the many lessons learned from decades of work in community forestry and community-based natural resource management, transboundary conservation approaches provide an opportunity for non-military actors to participate and assist in borderland conflict prevention or conflict management. The bringing together of civil-society, military, administrative and political actors in borderlands can dilute military tensions both within and between countries;
3. transboundary conservation further strengthens peace through improved communication and transparency. This is achieved with bi-national or multi-national monitoring systems and taskforces comprising actors of the military, administrative and political sectors, and those of civil society; and
4. transboundary conservation may produce several economically beneficial spin-offs. Under what I would call *Pax ekologica*, parks would not need heavy eco-guard units, crime would be reduced, ecotourists would be safe, there would be collaboration on the implementation of international conventions and respective national environmental laws, and there would be cooperation on the detection of transboundary crimes such as poaching and illegal logging. A bilateral commitment to develop TBCAs may also assist in attracting funding from donors and the private sector: transboundary conservation is a legitimate area for the concern of international organisations such as ITTO and even at this early stage of development in the tropics is attracting considerable donor interest.

An appropriate model of transboundary conservation for peace would involve the demilitarisation of the TBCA and the identification of all the threats originating from any one country and directed to its neighbour within the TBCA. Areas of mutual assistance would also need to be identified. Based on this a system of detection and mutual information would be set up. With such coordination, military or police activities could be performed by eco-guards and local development initiatives. In cases where threats require the use of police or the military, cooperating countries would determine appropriate modalities for their deployment.

Conservation and peace may truly interact if TBCA projects are elaborated, not as unilateral initiatives that speculate on the possible collaboration of the neighbours, but through genuine bilateral cooperation. They should also have strong political backing in the design and implementation phases, and the signals for such backing should be given by the highest political authorities of cooperating countries. A good example of this is the Kgalagadi Transboundary Park, which was jointly inaugurated in May 2000 by presidents Thabo Mbeki of the Republic of South Africa and Festus Mogae of Botswana. Such a high-level gesture can change public opinion, build an irreversibly positive attitude to transboundary conservation, and influence the national leadership at lower levels in all the countries concerned.

Making conservation and people's development interactive

In addition to the goal of transboundary conservation, TBCAs should embrace the equally noble goal of supporting the economic and sociocultural development of the local people who depend on the transboundary resources for their subsistence. Indeed, among the perennial enemies of conservation in borderlands is poverty and lack of access to the elements of sociocultural emancipation. Border regions are often neglected in development planning, and border communities are similarly neglected and isolated. They are often adversely affected by unsustainable economic activities such as illegal logging and mining, or they may find themselves competing for space with biodiversity conservation programs and with few economic alternatives to engaging in illegal transboundary trade or serving in local conflicts. This may lead to conditions that fuel border tensions and conflicts and which can be exploited and controlled by the police or military groups. For example, because of the chaos caused by the ethnic conflicts in the tri-border region between Rwanda, Uganda and DRC, armed groups in the official and rebel armies reportedly engaged in criminal cross-border trade of timber and minerals. In economies of violence, as in the case of the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, using timber and minerals as a currency to obtain weapons became a strong incentive for war and complicated the search of peace.

Biodiversity conservation can be a building block for *Pax ekologica*, allowing the peoples of border regions to derive benefits through mutual understanding and friendship. For this to happen, the profile of transboundary conservation must be raised, particularly at the higher political levels, including in countries with the means to contribute financial resources to support TBCA initiatives. As border stability, border region development and biodiversity conservation interact, transboundary conservation should take on board analysts other than conservationists, including security agencies, not only to raise awareness about the link between border security and biodiversity conservation, but also to ensure that transboundary conservation is part of all border plans. If this happens, transboundary conservation could represent a new dawn for borderland communities.