

Arusha 1961: The Making of the Global Environment in an East African Town

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My research project is a microhistory of a key turning point in the evolution of international environmental governance: the IUCN/UNESCO/FAO Conference on Nature and Natural Resources in Modern African States, which took place in Arusha, Tanganyika in September 1961. Sandwiched between the imperial era's London Convention on Wild Fauna of 1933 and the better-known Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment of 1972, the Arusha Conference solidified the concept that certain ecosystems and species populations were part of a global commons beyond the sovereignty of any nation, locality, or 'tribe.' It was here that Julius Nyerere, who had led Tanganyika's independence struggle and later became its prime minister, sent a minister to deliver a speech that became known as the Arusha Manifesto. This manifesto declared his young nation's bold commitment to protecting wildlife for future generations—offering a collective sigh of relief for Sir Julian Huxley and other organizers anxious about the fate of sub-Saharan Africa's wild animals in an era of Cold War brinkmanship and decolonization. Yet over 22 Africans attended the conference as well, and their story is not well documented in the scholarship on this era. Indeed, as the conference proceeded and implementation of its key proposals began, the supranational vision of a "global heritage of all mankind" unraveled as fissures emerged between Euro-American and African visions of environmental sovereignty; between strict preservation, market-oriented conservation, and customary land use; and between systems ecologists' belief in homeostasis and the unruly animals they encountered in the grasslands of East Africa.

I argue that the notion of wild animals and their savanna homelands as global commons emerged at a time of crisis for international conservation. Huxley and other IUCN representatives were afraid that postcolonial governments would "appease" indigenous peoples hoping for a return of customary lands once seized by European colonizers. Arusha was the gateway to the Serengeti National Park, which the British colonial government had just divided in 1959 to accommodate Maasai pastoralists. As such, Northern conservationists used Arusha to extend the UN idea of "trusteeship" to encompass ecosystems and animals. In their eyes, Africans held wildebeest and lions only as trustees, not as owners—a framework that political ecologists have rightly seen as an imposition of "wilderness" onto rural pastoralists and farmers.

Yet there is another side to the Arusha story that foregrounds African attendees' aspirations and choices. The Kenyan zoologist David P. Wasawo and the Tanganyikan game warden H. S. Mahinda, to name just two, balked at Euro-Americans' racist fears about Africans' ability to manage their own lands—and accused former imperialists of being the real destroyers. Other African attendees favored "profit and protein" over preservation, insisting that wildlife had to "pay for themselves" through game cropping schemes designed to feed malnourished villagers and build export markets. In this sense, African conservationists framed Arusha as a time-stamped bargain in which Tanzanians, Kenyans, and others agreed to cede some national sovereignty in exchange for international technical aid and dryland development. Moreover, non-human actors such as migrating animals, unpredictable rains, and parasites pursued their own dynamics after years of drought, thwarting hopes for sustained yields and health improvement.

A close examination of the Arusha Conference of 1961 and its aftermath reveals why the globalization, decolonization, commodification, and preservation of nature remain incompatible goals.