Chapter 1
Strategic Opportunism: A Pragmatic Approach to Conservation in Africa

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> *You can form all the committees, all the societies, all the working groups, all the charities you like but you know that in the end, it is that one individual, that one individual that has passion, that one individual that has fire in the belly, that one individual that is determined that something should be done.*
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> *Sir David Attenborough: Extract from address at the Future for Nature Awards Ceremony, Arnhem, The Netherlands, 2009*

In the three decades since the United Nations Convention on Environment and Development convened in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, many billions of dollars have been invested in time-bound projects aimed at solving conservation crises and addressing human wellbeing needs in Africa. Much has been achieved. Yet in many countries the threats to biodiversity and to human development have increased rather than declined. Despite this sobering background, reasons for hope can be found in a selection of highly successful projects that offer models for adoption. Conservation success is possible in Africa.

This book addresses a complex mix of questions that challenge the minds of young conservationists and environmental scientists working in Africa: "How does one succeed in designing, initiating, implementing and leading to successful conclusion conservation projects in countries with weak institutions, unpredictable socio-economic and political trajectories, and limited human and financial capacities?" In search of answers to these questions, this book synthesises the lessons learned from a diversity of projects, across ten countries, each of which has been sustained for two or more decades. Detailed narratives are presented on the key personalities that have conceived, conducted and concluded long-term projects – personal stories of vision, challenges, failure, frustration, passion and persistence ultimately leading to success.

The case studies vary widely in their geography and goals. In selecting models that illustrate fundamental lessons, the three massively funded mega-projects of the region – those of the Peace Parks Foundation, African Parks Foundation, and the Working for Water Project – have been omitted. They have been widely celebrated

and are well known. Here I have chosen less familiar and more moderately funded projects. Each demonstrate pragmatic solutions to complex problems. The single-handed commitment to re-discover and save the last surviving populations of giant sable in the miombo woodlands of central Angola, through the capture, transloca-tion and establishment of robust breeding herds of this magnificent antelope, con-trasts with the robustly funded, three-decade-long programme with over one hundred participants that reversed the annual loss of 455,000 seabirds to predation by feral cats on a sub-Antarctic island. The foresight of Zimbabwean and Namibian ecologists in placing rural communities at the centre of conservation programmes, by giving value to wildlife populations and benefits to local people, transformed a land degradation problem into a socio-ecological solution. Across ten countries, building capacity in botanical collection, documentation and herbarium manage-ment expanded into a global project that placed the knowledge base of Africa's flora onto an electronic data system accessible to researchers and conservation planners in even the most remote corners of the continent. None of these projects enjoyed immediate results. Each required remarkable leadership skills that combined vision, a generosity of spirit, fortuitous timing and the exploitation of the unexpected. These characteristics encapsulate the theme of this book: strategic opportunism.

The projects include models from both rich and poor countries, from those with long histories of biodiversity research and wildlife conservation, to those with weaker institutions and difficult histories. Some accounts are comprehensive and based on scores of peer-reviewed publications. Others are more anecdotal and draw on the field experience of key players, on correspondence and on personal interviews.

Focusing on the drivers of project success, twelve guiding lessons emerge from approaches where leaders took the long view on conservation. These fundamentals for success reflect the tools used, knowingly or not, by practitioners. The projects have survived changes in political leadership, economic climate and institutional arrangements, illustrating how success can be achieved regardless of systems of governance, of a nation's wealth, or of cultural traditions.

The case studies all have one characteristic in common – the central role of a champion or of champions driving an idea to success. In sharp contrast to stories of success in the business sector, none of these champions received any financial reward from their innovations and energy. In reality, many suffered years of physi-cal and financial difficulty, in isolation – often with their life partners and families – and often without recognition other than that of their peers. Success resulted from inspiration, passion, innovation, opportunity and determination: Sir David Attenborough's 'fire in the belly'.

Reference

Attenborough D (2009) Keynote speech. Future for Nature Awards, Arnhem