State interests and multilateral cooperation: thinking strategically about achieving 'wise use' of the Okavango Delta system

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Abstract

This paper explores possibilities for achieving 'wise use', defined as the sustainable utilisation of resources of the Okavango Delta system, within the framework of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The paper argues that while the Ramsar Convention's wise use strategic plan forms an important basis for collective action toward sustainably managing the Okavango River Basin as a whole, there are numerous barriers to success, the most important of which is the abiding behaviour of the region's state-makers in defense of sovereignty and pursuit of narrow national interest. In spite of this formidable barrier to success, the paper highlights a number of on-going multilateral activities that may serve to further the aims of wise use of the Okavango River Basin system. It also provides a number of practical suggestions for furthering progressive frameworks of action. The paper is based on a close reading of published and unpublished written materials and the findings of a number of open-ended interviews conducted with stakeholders active in the Okavango River Basin.

Keywords: Wetland; Ramsar Convention; Co-management; Wise use; Cooperation and conflict

1. Introduction

This paper considers the possible contribution the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance might make toward the successful management of the Okavango Delta system. The paper is divided into eight sections. Following this brief introduction, Section 2 discusses the Ramsar Convention in the context of other international conventions and treaties. Section 3 then sets these global activities within the context of regional perspectives on peace, security, economic development and environmental sustainability. There I highlight the current contrasting optimistic and pessimistic discourses operative in the region. Section 4 looks specifically at current activities in the Okavango Delta system (ODS) as representative of the tension between collective action and narrow state self-interest. Section 5 presents a long list of existing barriers to successful management of the ODS while Section 6 discusses hopeful elements for sustainable use and resource management. Section 7 presents a number of ways forward for achieving 'wise use' while Section 8 presents some summary observations. In general, the paper privileges optimistic analyses of emerging forms of multilateral cooperation, while not ignoring the reality or downplaying the influence of powerful negative forces active in both the Basin and the Southern African region.

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2. Managing the situation: Ramsar and international conventions

Indicators of global environmental crisis are many and varied, but most involve some form of resource depletion—deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, species loss, habitat conversion—or the direct consequences of its use—global warming, acid rain, pollution. If nothing else, negotiations at Rio gave rise to several global conventions: e.g., the framework convention on climate change (FCCC), convention to combat desertification (CCD), convention on biodiversity preservation (CBD). It also created, among other things, the global environmental facility (GEF). Together, these conventions and institutions are intended to help 'manage' the crisis, in the case of the FCCC to set limits on use; in the case of both the CBD and CCD, to reverse the loss.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as waterfowl habitats preceded these perhaps more well-known conventions by more than twenty years. It is 'the oldest of the four nature conservation treaties which include the World Heritage Convention, CITES and the Bonn Convention' (Njuguna, 1992, p. 9). Taking its name from the place where the inaugural meeting was held—Ramsar, Iran—in 1971, the Ramsar Convention 'provides the framework for international cooperation for the conservation of wetlands, the first and, so far, the only ecosystem type which has its own international treaty... The parties to the convention agree to include wetland conservation in their national planning and to promote their sound utilisation, especially as habitat for waterbirds' (SARDC, n.d.). According to Njuguna (1992, p. 9), UNESCO serves as the depository of the convention whose 'Secretariat, or Bureau, is an independent body administered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB). The convention has its headquarters in Gland, Switzerland'. Among SADC states, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia are parties to the convention.

Wetlands, particularly the more commonly defined sorts—peatlands, bogs, fens, swamps—have had a particularly rough ride through history. Their conversion to other uses, and hence their destruction, extends in the European context at least as far back as the 11th Century, the negative environmental consequences of such behaviour being well-known almost from the beginning (Ponting, 1991). According to Goude (1997, pp. 110–111),

> On a global basis the loss of wetland habitats (marshes, bogs, swamps, fens, mires, etc.) is a cause of considerable concern... In all, wetlands cover about 6 per cent of the earth's surface (not far short of the total under tropical rainforest), and so they are far from being trivial, even though they tend to occur in relatively small patches. However, they also account for about one-quarter of the earth's total net primary productivity, have a very diverse fauna and flora, and provide crucial wintering, breeding and refuge areas for wildlife. According to some sources, the world may have lost half of its wetlands since 1900, and the USA alone has lost 54 per cent of its original wetland area, primarily because of agricultural developments. There are, however, other threats, including drainage, dredging, filling, peat removal, pollution, and channelization.

Ramsar was the direct result of the collective desire of concerned individuals to see wetlands destruction stopped, indeed reversed, through the power of the sovereign state. It is logical that the state has been the primary vehicle through which Ramsar operates, for it has been at the hands of both public policy and public neglect that wetlands have suffered most.

Ramsar's methods have changed through time, with an initial concern for locating wetlands of international importance within protected areas making way for more nuanced arguments in favour of 'wise use'. This is in keeping with most conservation-oriented organisations' shift toward sustainable utilisation, an idea and practice to which I return below. At the same time, Ramsar's definition of a wetland has broadened considerably, such that the traditional ideas of wetland (bogs, fens), are subsumed under the more comprehensive term wetland *system*. Compare the two definitions below as an example:

> **Wetland**, geographic area with characteristics of both dry land and bodies of water. Wetlands typically occur in low-lying areas that receive fresh water at the edges of lakes, ponds, streams, and rivers, or salt water from tides in coastal areas protected from waves. In wetlands, the surface of the water, called the water table, is usually at, above, or just below the land surface for enough time to restrict the growth of plants to those that are adapted to wet conditions and promote the development of soils characteristic of a wet environment... Wetlands can be classified into three general categories: marshes, swamps, and peatlands. Within each of these categories, wetlands can vary widely. Because wetlands depend on water sources, their boundaries can change (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia, 2000).

> **Wetland**, 'areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine waters, the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres' and may include 'riparian and coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands, or islands or bodies of marine water deeper than six metres at low tide lying within'. (Ramsar Convention quoted in Hollis, Holland, Maltby and Larson, 1988).

Whereas the former comprises the traditional notion of a wetland as a water-logged area limited in size (e.g., a fen), the latter encompasses not only the former but virtually all earth-bound elements of the water cycle. According to Blasco (1997).

The resolution on Ramsar and water is of high significance, because for the first time the Conference of the Parties is addressing the question of 'the important hydrological functions of wetlands, including groundwater recharge, water quality improvement and flood allevia-

tion, and the inextricable link between wetlands and water resources ... Fresh, high quality water is already critically scarce in many places, and looks set to become scarce in many other locations. Water may well be the critical environment and development issue of the 21st Century.

Wider definitions of 'wetlands', then, seek to locate bogs, fens and marshes within the context of integrated water resources management. The intention clearly is to place traditional wetlands within an entire system whose overall sustainability is subject to a wide variety of human and natural interventions. Again the logic is impeccable: what is the use of 'managing' a wetland whose very existence may depend on far-removed agricultural, industrial and urban practices? To this end, Ramsar is seeking, among other things, universal membership in the convention and designation of all wetlands—not simply those which parties to the convention consider as their 'flagships'. Hence, successful management of the Okavango Delta itself depends on successful management of the Okavango River Basin system (see, more generally Dugan, 1992).

Equally important for the conservation of traditionally-defined wetlands is the way in which Ramsar has attempted to locate the convention itself within the wider ambit of the FCCC, CBD and CCD (Blasco, 1997). This is part of a broader strategy to try and change peoples' ways of thinking about the environment or natural resources as somehow apart from their daily concerns, as somewhat akin to specialist interests—it is an attempt at what Phillips (1998) calls 'mainstreaming wetlands'. This is also 'wise use' of its own resources, given the fact that the Ramsar budget and permanent staff numbers pale in comparison to these global conventions. Articulating the many 'goods and services' wetlands provide to humanity has long been a means by which those interested in their conservation argue against habitat conversion (Matiza, 1994; Phillips, 1998; Hollis et al., 1988). More recently, economic valuation of wetlands in the context of biological diversity and natural resources accounting has been another (Richardson, 1998). Added to this are arguments for wetlands' central role as buffers in combating desertification, and as valuable carbon sinks in the struggle against global warming (Davidson, 2000).

The convention has also sought to align itself with powerful global NGOs either with a mass membership base—Wetlands International, Worldwide Fund for Nature, Birdlife International—or with a mixed membership including a core of research scientists—International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Most recently it has entered into a partnership with the Danone Group through the Evian Project to improve internet facilities for ten 'developing and transition Contracting Parties' (Phillips, 1998). To give form to these many activities, Ramsar formulated a strategic plan for the period 1997–2002. Adopted in 1996, the strategic plan describes some 125 actions under the eight General objectives listed below:

(a) universal membership,
(b) wise use of wetlands,
(c) education, public awareness and communication,
(d) capacity building and training,
(e) management of wetlands of international importance,
(f) designation of Ramsar sites,
(g) international cooperation,
(h) strengthening the institutions of the convention.

This plan was updated at the 8th Convention of the Parties (COP) for the 2003–2007 time period. How all of these activities and interests play out in the context of the ODS is the subject of the next section. At this point it is important to locate these activities within a more theoretical framework so that we may begin to see the possibilities or improbabilities for success either at global or local level.

3. Selfish state interest or collective multilateral action?

What are we to make of all this activity? How likely is it to succeed, not only in preserving wetlands but, in the Southern African context, in building regional peace? How one answers these questions depends to a great deal on whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about regional futures. In Southern Africa today there are parallel, opposed narratives in regular use to explain contemporary events and guide (policy) decisions. One reflects the classical realist assertions of self-seeking 'statecraft'. It is overwhelmingly pessimistic in its analyses of the region. The other is a relatively optimistic liberal institutionalist approach which believes that world order values—peace, economic prosperity, environmental sustainability—are possible through a combination of good institutions and best practices. Each provides compelling evidence in support of its analyses. Liberal institutionalist narratives argue that there are three dominant themes driving regional developments: the post-apartheid democratic moment; the socio-economics of neo-liberal structural adjustment, now including a "regional integration" component; and the post-Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development emphasis on the collective management of natural resources. The manner in which these inter-link and overlap forms the basis for the emergence of more positive and constructive inter-, intra- and trans–state relations: a new language fuelling new thinking about a new regionalism (Swatuk and Black, 1997).

Supporters of this perspective usually emphasize the functional character of the new regionalism, with the Southern African Development Community (SADC),

transnational, sub-national and multilateral activity at the forefront of analysis. An emerging regional energy grid, a variety of protocols, improved communications and transportation networks, transnationally managed "super parks", and new water laws, are all said to be moving the region in the direction of cooperation and peace. The post-apartheid democratic moment, therefore, facilitates the collective pursuit of world order values in the region. These are dependent upon increasing space for civil society to articulate its diverse needs and interests and exercise its capabilities free from a domineering and over-developed state. They also require the more efficient allocation of often-scarce resources by state-makers in the region and the development of creative and effective partnerships between and among relevant stakeholders (state, corporate, (I)NGO, and CBO-based).

To be sure, the optimist continues, there are many obstacles along the road to regional peace and security. Like much of Sub-Saharan Africa, the SADC region is characterized by weak, distorted and divided economies, war-battered societies, and too-often unresponsive governments. Yet, unlike most of Africa, the SADC region enjoys the confidence and concern of the industrialized, OECD world. As such, there seems to be much concentrated global effort toward making the African Renaissance a reality, at least in this region.

This perspective, in a nutshell, characterises all those active in conservation and development activities in the ODS—from local NGOs like the Kalahari Conservation Society, to international ones like Conservation International, from bilateral and multilateral donors like SIDA, the EU, and GEF to regional think tanks like IUCN-ROSA, the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia and the Harry Oppenheimer Okavango Research Centre.

However, for an increasing number of observers, it is the obstacles that mark the proper point of departure in regional analysis. State-makers in Africa's Great Lakes region—the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi—and Angola, are without doubt engaged in Machiavellian/Clausewitzian practices of statecraft. Others—Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Botswana and South Africa—look on with varying degrees of interest. Levels of participation are partially determined by the immediacy of geopolitical events and cost/benefit analysis. Personalities and personal rule—the essence of Bismarck and Tallyrand, of classical realism, and so belittled in analyses of African politics over the last three decades—seem once again to be playing decisive roles in policy-making.

Even in those countries where bureaucratic structures of decision making are more firmly entrenched—i.e., Botswana and South Africa—calculations are increasingly made on the basis of narrow 'national interests'. Ironically, states may be seen to be moving, simultaneously, in two directions: while they are busy building 'national fences' in a 'dangerous region', at the same time, departments of water affairs, tourism, trade and industry, among others, are actively seeking ways of tearing and keeping these national fences down.

The environment, quite literally, stands at the centre of these contradictions. Whereas the border areas between Namibia, Angola and Botswana have become sites of conflict, these countries share the Okavango River Basin and are party to the international Okavango River Basin Commission, Okacom. Similarly, the Zambezi Basin marks a zone of cooperation through the large, multilateral Zambezi River Action Plan (Zacplan), but also forms an area of cross-border conflict among the sovereign states of Angola, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. Interestingly, in each case, conflict flows with the run of river: Headwater states are deep in conflict; those at mid-flow stand poised between Janus and Minerva; those at the mouth feel relatively helpless, as they contribute virtually nothing to the flow but accumulate everyone's effluent, but are most keen on multilateral agreement. Depending on whether one is optimistic or pessimistic, privileges cooperation or conflict, the environment either appears as the locus of opportunity for regional peace-building or as a fragmented series of resources for defense and capture (Swatuk, 2002).

To say that conflict and cooperation are characteristic of the region is stating the obvious. A pertinent question to ask, however, is which of these trends is likely to dominate regional relations during the first decade of the 21st Century? And, as a corollary, can deliberate emphasis on cooperative tendencies in one issue area help foster abatement of conflict in another?

While most of the non-state actors seem more inclined to answer 'yes' to the peacemaking potential of environmental cooperation, what state-makers really think is less clear. Ramsar's activity, like most environmental organisations in the world today, mirrors the guardedly optimistic neo-institutionalist perspective on world affairs: while not losing sight of the myriad dangers let loose by a world of states jealously guarding sovereignty, they continue to beaver away at building creative coalitions and science-based arguments in the hope that formerly reluctant state-makers will be trapped in an incontrovertible knowledge net. Let us now turn to a case study of the ODS.

4. Managing the Okavango Delta or the Delta system?

It must be made clear from the outset that sustainable management of the Delta itself is dependent upon sustainable management of the entire Okavango River Basin—unsustainable inputs upstream (e.g., large-scale irrigated agricultural projects, large dams near the

headwaters, many small farm dams along a repopulated middle river) will fundamentally alter the Delta. According to Hollis et al. (1988), 'The components that support a wetland often originate well outside its boundary. Wise use of wetlands therefore often requires that appropriate conservation measures be taken beyond the boundary of the wetland. For example, ensuring a continuing supply of water of appropriate quality may require soil conservation measures in the headwaters, minimal upstream diversions of river-water, and the protection of water courses from industrial pollution'.

This is not to undermine the very necessary national-level activity on-going in Botswana of devising both a national inventory of wetlands and a management plan for the Okavango Delta itself. There are numerous resource use conflicts in place both in the core and buffer zones that must be addressed irrespective of upstream, transition zone, activities (Peters, 1994; Arntzen and Veenendaal, 1986; Van der Heiden, 1992; Hasler, 2000a,b).

The 'core' area is defined as one of 'the largest and most important inland wetlands in the world, covering over 15,000 square kilometres' (Monna, 1999). If one includes the buffer zone, the area enlarges significantly: 'Botswana submitted documents containing a description of a wetland known as "The Okavango Delta system"... The Ramsar site is measured at approximately 68,640 square kilometres (6,684,000 ha)... The designated area includes the Okavango River, the entire Okavango Delta, Lake Ngami and parts of the Kwando and Linyati River systems that fall along the western boundary of the Chobe National Park' (http://ramsar.org). The transition zone extends to the headwaters in Angola's Bie Plateau.

Botswana became a contracting party to the convention in April 1997 (Monna, 1997; Phillips, 1997). Most observers feel that this act was taken in regard to narrow national interest: that upstream threats to the Delta, in particular planned abstraction by Namibia and the *potential* for the same by a peaceful Angola forced policy makers in Botswana to try to locate regional water disputes within a framework of global interests. Similarly, whereas in the past the Government of Botswana was reluctant to designate the Delta as a World Heritage Site—fearing global backlash regarding its own developmental plans (IUCN, 1992)—it eventually became clear that in the context of 'wise use', it was better to become party to these conventions than to stand apart from them.

The 1987 Regina Conference of the Parties adopted the following definition of 'wise use': 'The wise use of wetlands is their sustainable utilisation for the benefit of humankind in a way compatible with the maintenance of the natural properties of the ecosystem'. Sustainable utilisation is defined as 'human use of a wetland so that it may yield the greatest continuous benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations' (both quotations in Hollis et al., 1988). This definition of wise use as sustainable utilisation is one of the most significant concessions made by conservation organisations in the last twenty years. It marks the culmination of a learning process whereby people and communities were conceptually re-inserted into the landscape by organisations that still wish they were not there: hence, core, buffer and transition areas. In the case of the ODS, far from a 'pristine wilderness', the entire 'system' is populated with even the highly protected core providing 'food for the pot' for local communities resident there. In order to maintain the ecological character of the river, each of these zones require comprehensive management plans, sufficient human and capital resources, and the political will to see that policies are not only put in place but acted upon. As the ODS is an international river basin, its management requires a very creative and determined approach to integrated water resources management.

5. Barriers to success

Achieving 'wise use', understood to mean 'sustainable utilisation' of the system's resources, is no small task. There are numerous barriers to success, a partial list of which would include:

1. A millennium long history of the world's ill treatment of wetlands.
2. Regional and national histories of war/displacement/underdevelopment.
3. Abiding 1950s-style conceptions of development as modernization and modernization as 'the mega-project'.
4. Equally abiding post-WWII beliefs that science and technology will always provide solutions.
5. In Namibia and Botswana, national development dreams and the capital resources to realise them.
6. In Angola (and also Namibia), post-War reconstruction and the concomitant rising expectations on the part of the peasantry that the state will provide.
7. The visible presence of the Okavango River as a linear oasis through an otherwise mostly arid landscape and peoples' desire to benefit from and live close to those waters.
8. Inappropriate institutional frameworks which locate resource use decisions across numerous departments, ministries and agencies.
9. Limited local human resource capacity.
10. A knowledge deficit regarding both the dynamics of the ODS and what constitutes 'sustainable use'.
11. Uncertain political will both within and across states.
12. Obstinence/arrogance on the part of global environmental organisations.

13. A sensationalist media.
14. Problems of communication between different language groups along the ODS and between Portuguese speaking Angolan government officials and their counterparts in Namibia and Botswana.

While this is a formidable list of barriers to successful conservation and wise use, there are also numerous favourable factors in place.

6. Hopeful elements

Two favourable elements that often go unremarked are time and the robustness of the ODS. In terms of the latter, according to Wolski (personal communication), the Delta itself is less vulnerable than we think it is. On the one hand, it *looks* vulnerable due to the contrast with its surroundings. However, on the other hand, we tend to forget, in Wolski's view, that the Delta is constantly changing. 'It is subject to such big natural variability that it can sustain much more than we anticipate. This dampens the impact of variability because it is used to such variability'. Also according to Wolski, the system is so complex and the changes that we have seen have been so gradual it is virtually impossible to tell which are man-made and which natural. This is not to counsel complacency. It does suggest, however, that there is a good deal of time in which to articulate viable management plans, to sort out the necessary inter-state modalities, and to build implementation capacity. Also contributing to the time factor is the relatively unpopulated character of the basin itself, in particular the upper catchment—a situation that will no doubt change as Angola consolidates peace.

Another key favourable element is global interest/expertise/capital. This comes in a wide variety of forms: from bilateral support for the development of an Okavango River Basin management plan (Swiss Small Grant Project, 2000), to an EU-supported, multi-disciplinary/multi-university project focussing on achieving a balance between social and ecosystem needs in an international river basin; from the SIDA-sponsored project Every River Has Its People (ERHIP) which brings together six NGOs from Namibia and Botswana to study ways in which communities may be made active partners in the management of the ODS, to a Conservation International administered project investigating prospects for establishing a transboundary 'peace park' extending from the Delta into the (presently moribund) Cuando-Cubango controlled hunting area (more generally, see De Villiers, 1999). Ramsar is active in many of these and related activities, and there is a strong synergy between projects and groups, in part facilitated by the small scientific communities that exist in both Namibia and Botswana. While they may disagree on goals and methods—with the Namibian National Eastern Water Carrier being the prime case in point—they do nevertheless continue to liaise with one another and on occasion work together.

Local interest is another key factor in support of conservation/wise use efforts. For example, ERHIP has its roots in the Okavango Liaison Group's efforts to strengthen dialogue between the governments of Namibia and Botswana regarding use of the waters of the Okavango River. The history of the OLG itself grows out of local Ngamiland action against the Government of Botswana's own Southern Okavango Integrated Water Development Project. This long tradition of social activism is buttressed by the relatively democratic Kgotla system of traditional government. Local communities lacking organisation have been helped by a wide variety of indigenous (KCS, DRFN) and international (CI, International Rivers Network) NGOs whose own conservation-oriented interests overlap with local community desires for access and (sustainable) use.

Lastly, there are a wide variety of regional interstate frameworks (SADC, Okacom, Orange River Basin Commission, Limpopo River Basin Commission), whose various protocols (e.g., on trade, tourism, shared watercourses) are themselves based upon global accords and conventions (e.g., Helsinki Rules, UN Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of Inland Waters, CITES) (See Chenje, 2000; Chenje and Johnson, 1996; Nakayama, 2003 for details). As stated earlier, the small base of scientists in the region ensures that many of the same faces meet time and again in different forums, so sometimes building networks of trust (and, admittedly, sometimes animosity). With regard to water resources management, this is most evident in the SADC Water Sector and SIDA supported 'WaterNET', an annual meeting of the region's physical and social scientists active in water issues.

7. Thinking strategically: achieving wise use

Clearly, there is a great deal of interest and activity on-going around the Okavango Delta itself and the wider ODS. Two questions remain: Does all of this activity contribute to achieving our goals of ecosystem maintenance/wise use and building regional peace? What needs to be done to ensure our interrelated goals are achieved?

An adequate answer to the first question is only possible through further elaboration of the barriers to success presented in list form above—an exercise not possible under present time and space limitations for this paper. Let me simply say this: all of this activity should be viewed as the beginning and necessary stages of a long struggle.

First, knowledge is power: countering extant ways of 'doing' politics and development can only be achieved by building a knowledge base that shows parochial politicians and destructive developmentalists the irrefutable benefits of ecosystem maintenance and wise use. It is unfortunate that we are forced to engage state-makers with instrumental value arguments. Preserving nature should need no political/social/economic justification: in my opinion there is intrinsic value in nature. But politicians are too-often far from 'green', and too-often privilege industries that are 'brown'. As civil servants in Windhoek are quick to point out: asking questions about the sustainability of the city's two new garment industries, which will likely employ 8–10,000 people and inject an estimated N$25 million/annum into Windhoek's economy—effluent quality? Water use efficiency? Why Windhoek and not Okahandja?—is to commit a treasonable act. You do so at risk of your job.

Set in regional terms, this is a distressing example. For the legacies of colonialism, imperialism and underdevelopment have created an extreme developmental deficit. State-makers in Namibia, Angola and Botswana all came of age during the height of the modernization period. Their understanding of development rests undeniably on the conquest of nature, where 'biodiversity loss' resulting from habitat conversion includes certain cultural groups and cultural practices. So, water is power and power drives economies and economies create jobs. What hope do we have for wetlands, even the wise use of wetlands, in light of such thinking?

We need to continue to conduct policy-relevant social and physical scientific research so that policy makers see that there are options and that these options can translate into votes. One of the main reasons why community based natural resources management as conceived by USAID in Botswana failed so dismally is because USAID failed to recognise the political implications of 'empowering people at the margins'. Upon departing from Botswana, one USAID official remarked, 'the government simply is not interested' (personal communication). But the official was wrong: the government was very interested—that is why boreholes and drought relief and roads and clinics are the method of choice: government is more interested in maintaining itself in power than in empowering people to think for themselves, to realise that there are choices. A population with choice, particularly in an ethnically divided society, is a potential political problem.

Recognising this, we need to cultivate smart partnerships within and beyond states. There are often key individuals in certain ministries who wield a lot of power and influence. Kadar Asmal in South Africa is the obvious example: as Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Asmal was able to achieve a great deal of good in a short period of time. In Botswana, Ian Khama may play that same role. It is an unfortunate truth that cultivating a relationship between Khama and, for example, the Executive Directors of Birdlife International and the IUCN may do more good for conservation in Botswana than all the science in the world. But this is the essence of politics.

Thus, we must continue to build networks and sympathetic constituencies at local, national, regional and global levels. In doing so, we must work to relocate the idea of 'wetland' beyond departments/ministries of the environment and place it squarely where the power lies: in the Ministries of Industry, Trade, Finance, Mining, Fisheries, for example. Economic valuation arguments based on transboundary peace parks and global tourism are a necessary beginning as it builds links between a variety of Ministries in all basin countries and presents possibilities for shared positive economic outcomes. At the same time we need to work within existing frameworks—SADC, Okacom—and not reinvent the wheel. The small scientific base in the region means that we can perhaps build synergies at the regional level that might not otherwise be possible in more complex political economies. An interesting angle to this is the potential role South Africa may play as impartial 'third party'. The scientific community in South Africa is far more developed than in the rest of the region and so constitutes a ready resource to be tapped. However, there is also the legacy of the 'regional hegemon', again playing itself out in economic/political terms and so there may be some resistance to this idea. Also, given worrying trends toward privatization and so-called public–private partnerships, South African involvement in the region in the form of 'consultancies' may be regarded negatively as a form of new imperialism.

We need to play to our strengths. This means recognising that although we may not change the fact or form of states and their tendency to operate on the grounds of narrow self-interest, we can work to build environmental awareness at grassroots level—meaning among the children of the region who will ultimately constitute the state-makers of the future. We should not underestimate the power of environmental education programmes.

Penultimately, those interested in conservation/wise use of wetlands broadly defined must think practically not patronisingly. There is an unfortunate tendency among many international NGOs and donor agencies to treat local people as 'objects of development'—it is the recreation of 19th Century thinking about racial hierarchies whose basis for truth today is 'the lab coat'. Local peoples' interests as well as their traditional forms of knowledge, must be respected, otherwise a constructive dialogue will never emerge. A practical approach, therefore, would be a scholarship fund to train people in natural resources management, economic valuation of natural resources, among other things—not to chase consultancy fees and act as global know-it-alls.

8. Concluding remarks

Lastly, the facts of state power, of 'national interests', and of sovereignty cannot be ignored. Indeed, taken together they constitute the fundamental problematique for successful management of the ODS. While many academics working in the social sciences use post-positivist, constructivist methods to interrogate the world around them, those operating in the area of natural resources management would do well to engage in a two level game. At one level it is useful to recognise that states are social constructions, that they are time bound historical artefacts, not timeless physical phenomena. Regarding them as such provides insight into capacities for changing the system, perhaps toward different, more inclusive and sustainable forms of social organisation, grouped, for example, around resources like river basins. However, at another level, we must acknowledge that those who inhabit states act as though they are timeless entities, taking their intellectual cues from Clausewitz and Machiavelli. There are those who argue that states counselling interdependence and multilateralism only do so because they are weak in a world of the strong. So, as a downstream state, Botswana is playing the multilateral card. By doing so it is hoping to eventually tie its upstream neighbours into a regime of sustainable river basin management. Botswana, in playing the 'environmental good guy', is understandably pursuing narrowly defined national interest in the form of Delta health for tourism and economic development. Namibia is more ambivalent about this. While it too is a contracting party to Ramsar, it has recently shelved plans to place the Lower Okavango River wetland on its list of wetlands of international importance (Kolberg, n.d.). However, through Okacom it remains willing to talk and to listen—very important activities indeed. But its stated intentions remain: to use the waters of the Okavango as part of a conjunctive use strategy that will ensure steady supplies of water and national development. Angola—not a Ramsar member—remains the unknown entity, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that a post-Savimbi Angola would behave much like present day Namibia. If one were to imagine him or herself as an Angolan state-maker, the first question one might ask of Botswana is why should Angola forego use of the waters of the Cubango and allow Botswana to reap all of the economic and social benefits? What is in it for me? Any successful co-management regime must be able to answer this question to the satisfaction of Angolan policy makers.

History shows that upstream states and regions within states have always taken the lion's share of the water. The Swakop river, for example, whose headwaters are in Windhoek, does not flow to the sea. The Delta presents a very difficult position, for, as an endoreic system, the waters end in an ecologically and socially vibrant physical space in the heart of another country. If Angola decides—officially through government, or informally through the actions of many—to abstract an amount of water from the river that will forever alter the Delta what is there to stop them from doing so? At the same time, Namibia's President Nujoma has mooted the idea that the long term solution to water scarcity not only in Namibia but in the arid parts of Botswana and South Africa may be achieved by tapping the headwaters of the Congo River, channelling it into the Cubango River and 'flooding the Okavango Delta', creating a massive lake from which water can then be canalized to various parts of the Kalahari 'thirstland' (*Mmegi*, 23–29 May 2003). If the leaders of three sovereign states should agree on such a project based on perceived mutual benefit, what sorts of arguments may be marshalled in support of preservation of the existing Okavango River system? Can shared membership in global conventions serve as the basis for sustainable use? Perhaps, but as long as state representatives to these conventions are located in relatively powerless agencies or marginal ministries, it is unlikely that sustainable use will move from theory to practice.

In any event, we must continue to build webs of knowledge and interest, to think practically, to lobby vehemently and to listen carefully. In this way, perhaps what is improbably possible—like integrated water resources use—may one day seem common sensical, like the fact of states themselves.

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