



COMMENTARY

How Should the ATBC Approach Conservation?

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‘Conservation practice is a profoundly political process’

Vasant Saberwal (2000) *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy*

‘All politics is local’

Congressman Tip O’Neill, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

‘Some of our ATBC members don’t think we should become embroiled in local politics, but rather focus on the big-picture issues’

W. John Kress, ATBC Executive Director

IN 2002 THE ASSOCIATION FOR TROPICAL BIOLOGY officially re-named itself as the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC). This change reflected growing interest in conservation biology as a research theme but, beyond this, it highlighted an emerging view that the association should advocate more actively for the conservation of imperiled tropical ecosystems—an endeavor long led by tropical biologists (*e.g.*, Janzen 2000, Wright & Andriamihaja 2002, Prance 2007). A few ATBC members, notably Ariel Lugo, spoke out emphatically against such a change in course, but this dissenting view was largely drowned out by a wave of enthusiasm for the ATBC’s broader, more crisis-oriented mission.

We now have a new name and a new mandate, but what does this mean, exactly? How should the ATBC approach tropical conservation, in reality and practice? Here I grapple with these questions from the perspective not just of a scientist, but also a real believer in the need for conservation action. As co-chair of the ATBC Conservation Committee, I am convinced that the association, with its wealth of scientific expertise and credibility, has a special responsibility to do more than merely study tropical organisms while the forests around us fall before the axe and bulldozer.

CONSERVATION REALITIES

In practical terms, the issue of how a scientific society approaches real-life conservation issues is not necessarily simple, as the quotations above demonstrate. The first quote is the least debatable: few

informed individuals would dispute that conservation in practice is inherently political. Life would be wonderful if conservation decisions were mostly based on objective scientific criteria, but they are not, except in rare circumstances. In reality, real-life conservation is influenced far more by political influence, money, media savvy, and public relations than by hard science (*cf.* Laurance 2008, Ghazoul 2009). To quote Saberwal (2000): ‘What gets conserved, and by whom, will ultimately be determined by social and political processes as much, if not more, than by the scientific knowledge we bring to bear.’ Those who succeed in real-world conservation learn such lessons very quickly (*e.g.*, Nogueira-Neto 1991, Janzen 2000, Laurance & Luizão 2007, Prance 2007) (Fig. S1).

The second quote above, by longtime U.S. Congressman Thomas (‘Tip’) O’Neill, reflects another key reality. In asserting that ‘All politics is local,’ O’Neill was arguing that many important changes happen locally, and that the concerns of residents and communities around the country profoundly affect the actions of their political representatives in Washington, DC. In a genuine sense, the ATBC faces a comparable reality. The tropical nature we hope to conserve is being imperiled in large part by myriad local actions, such as a new highway in Brazil, a new logging operation in Indonesia, or rampant illegal gold-mining in Suriname. Even global warming—the largest-scale battle we face—has resulted cumulatively from the actions of many small-scale drivers, such as myriad gas-guzzling cars, smoke-belching factories, and frontier colonists razing rain forests. With nature dying the death of a thousand cuts, conservation issues, like politics, are very often local.

This brings us to the final quote, from ATBC Executive Director John Kress. On several occasions Kress has related to me the view, expressed by others, that the ATBC should avoid engaging in local conservation issues because in doing so the association could easily become embroiled in local politics (Kress does not necessarily advocate this argument, but it is a sentiment he and I have heard often from some ATBC members). As I will explain below, I emphatically disagree with this perspective.

CONSERVATION AND THE ATBC

I see at least four compelling reasons why the ATBC should actively engage in ‘local’ conservation issues. First, as discussed above, local issues are very often where ‘the rubber meets the road’ in conservation. For example, the main threat to the splendid Yasuní

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National Park in Ecuador is not a general menace, such as global warming; it is a very specific, local threat—a 54 km-long road that the Brazilian oil company Petrobrás wants to punch into the heart of the park, and the uncontrolled forest colonization, hunting, and illicit gold mining such a road would facilitate. Likewise, Suriname's Nassau Mountain, a 400-km² hotspot of tropical endemism, is not being imperiled by some 'big-picture issue,' but rather by an open-pit bauxite mine and road network planned by a conglomerate of mining corporations.

Second, engaging in local issues is where the ATBC is most likely to have a lasting impact, and in this context the association can play a vital role in promoting conservation. Real-life conservation battles very often play out like this: a handful of dedicated local individuals or environmental groups attempts to rally public support to protect nature against a powerful threat—such as a timber or mining corporation, land developer, or state-backed road-building scheme. These pro-development entities often have large financial resources at their disposal, and by heralding a dire need for 'jobs' and offering various inducements to government decision-makers, they can create a juggernaut-like momentum in favor of their project.

In such cases, the burden of proof usually falls on conservationists to prove irrefutably that nature will be seriously damaged (Laurance 2007a). Even doing so, however, is not enough. Conservationists must not only win the scientific arguments; they must also win the battle for public opinion. Only by creating a hue and cry—by publicly confronting the project proponent and its government backers—can the local conservation interests win.

One of the most effective strategies for conservationists is to attract international attention—to shine a light on unseemly local practices or an environmental tragedy in the making. In Panama, for instance, local conservation groups had battled long and hard against aggressive land developments in forests around Panama City, with little success. Only when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) became interested and began to critique the weak enforcement of environmental laws in Panama, did the government and national media really begin to take notice.

It is under scenarios like this that a credible, international scientific organization such as the ATBC can be invaluable. It can dramatically raise the profile and media coverage for local conservation issues, bringing them to the attention of a far larger international audience. It can speak with the weight of hundreds of leading scientists, from many nations, thereby shielding local scientists engaged in conservation activities from pressures or threats. And it can bring to bear weighty scientific arguments in support of conservation.

Third, the ATBC can maximize its impact by choosing its battles strategically. Obviously, the time and resources of the ATBC are finite, and the range of local issues that it might become engaged in almost infinite. For this reason we must employ a kind of conservation triage: we must focus on issues of special conservation significance, where we have relevant expertise, and where we feel we can have a real impact.

As an example, consider a pending plan by the Indian government to construct a large scientific facility, a neutrino observatory, within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in the Western Ghats, a recognized biodiversity hotspot. The study site, part of the buffer zone of

the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and a critical wildlife corridor, is of exceptional conservation significance. The ATBC has several members, including Priya Davidar, our current president, and Kamal Bawa, a former president, who have many years of experience and useful local contacts in the region. The project was approved after a superficial 'Rapid EIA' process that failed to consider many of the on- and off-site impacts of the project. It is for these reasons that the ATBC Conservation Committee is currently considering a formal resolution to oppose the project. If formally approved by the ATBC Executive Council, the resolution will be accompanied as usual by press releases and media coverage that should sharply raise the public profile of the debate. Similar criteria have governed our decisions to engage in other local issues, such as the Yasuni and Nassau Mountain controversies mentioned above, among many others.

Finally, actively addressing local issues by no means precludes the ATBC from engaging in big-picture issues. Indeed, the association has taken an important role, via formal resolutions and declarations, in decrying general threats such as rapid deforestation in the Amazon and in SE Asia, widespread illegal gold-mining, and increasing forest destruction for tropical biofuels. We have also actively supported international carbon-trading for forest conservation (Laurance 2007b) and the establishment of a major nature-reserve network in Borneo. In each of these cases the ATBC has been one of a number of organizations seeking broad-scale changes in a big-picture issue.

In summary, I believe the ATBC can have it both ways. On the one hand, we can make modest but useful contributions to some major, high-profile conservation issues of broad importance. On the other hand, we can play a bigger, more profound role in some local but strategically important conservation problems. Both are unquestionably important, but at the end of the day, I believe it will be the local issues where the ATBC really makes its mark.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

FIGURE S1. Practicing conservationists have learned the importance of influencing key politicians and natural-resource managers, as illustrated by this environmental decision-makers course in Panama.

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