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# Reflecting on National Geographic Magazine and Academic Geography: The September 2005 Special Issue on Africa

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*Commentary*  
**Reflecting on National Geographic Magazine and  
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*William G. Moseley*

It was with interest that I opened the September 2005 special issue of *National Geographic Magazine* (hereafter NG Magazine) devoted to Africa, entitled “Africa: Whatever you thought, think again.” The title, at least in my mind, suggested that this special issue would critically assess commonly held (mis)perceptions about the continent, forcing its audience to wrestle with new perspectives and complexities. As many of us are aware, NG Magazine has had a somewhat uneasy relationship with academia. To be sure, NG Magazine has been well meaning in its efforts to enhance global understanding and expand peoples’ view of geography as a field of study. Nonetheless, the magazine also has come under criticism by academics from several disciplines for its Orientalism and perpetuation of stereotypes about the global South (e.g., Lutz and Collins 1993; Rothenberg 1994; Tuason 1999; Street 2000). So I hoped, at last, perhaps the magazine would use its heft (with about 10 million subscribers, it is the third largest magazine in America following *TV Guide* and *Reader’s Digest*) to give a fair and balanced presentation of the African situation. And so I read, beginning with these opening lines of the editors’ introduction:

*[Africa] is the place where, two and a half million years ago, humans and animals first converged, sharing some of the earth’s most spectacular ground. Today, with competition for resources on the rise, convergence has become collision, fueling war, disease, and extinction. Yet despite such calamities, Africa is alive with stories of renewal. In this issue, we explore how the continent embodies the challenge facing humankind: how to survive, and make a better life for ourselves, while sustaining a balance with nature. (p. 3)*

In other words, Africa is awash with problems that largely stem from overpopulation, corruption and resource scarcity, but there are some encouraging stories to be told — and within these stories lie lessons for

the rest of the world. Could this really be true? Was NG Magazine's new, revolutionary view on the continent just a redux of Robert Kaplan's "The Coming Anarchy" (1994) with a few happy stories thrown into the mix? Even though the narrative outlined in the previous excerpt waxes and wanes throughout the issue, it is almost always present at some level, starting with the introduction by Jared Diamond, entitled "The Shape of Africa," and then continuing in the seven subsequent articles: "Views of the Continent," "Inventing Nairobi," "Oil Boon," "Living with AIDS," "Who Rules the Forest," "Return to Zambia," and "Spirit of the Wild." While NG Magazine is to be commended for devoting an entire issue to setting the record straight on Africa, I find its main narrative, although soft-peddled and nuanced at times, to be problematic. To be more specific, I believe this issue: promotes a simplistic understanding of the relationship between population growth, environmental degradation and conflict; fails to highlight sufficiently the connections between Africa and global political economy; and tends to unquestioningly privilege the preservation of wildlife and natural areas over human livelihoods. I will spend the next several paragraphs discussing these concerns and then end with a few thoughts on the relationship between academic geography and NG Magazine.

#### **AFRICA: ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY POSTER CHILD?**

While never stated as such, the dominant conceptual frameworks employed in this issue are those of neo-Malthusianism and environmental security. Neo-Malthusianism, the notion that uncontrolled human population growth will outstrip resources and lead to environmental degradation, is quietly articulated throughout the issue, whereas the related concept of environmental security is a much stronger theme in many of the articles. The political scientist Homer-Dixon (1994) is most closely associated with the literature on environmental security, a body of scholarship which broadly argues that many political and ethnic conflicts stem from resource scarcity.

The environmental security theme first appears in the introductory article by Jared Diamond: "Tensions arise in Africa, as they do elsewhere, when people see no other way out of poverty except to fight their neighbors for dwindling resources." (p. xxiv) This thread is then most clearly apparent in the lead article by environmental writer David

Quammen, entitled “Tracing the Human Footprint.” Quammen tells the story of biologist J. Michael David Fay, who is flying back and forth across Africa taking thousands of low altitude aerial photographs. According to Fay (as narrated by Quammen):

*The ultimate goal of his Africa Megaflyover ... is to convince “the powers that be, in particular the U.S. Congress,” that integrating natural resource management into American Foreign policy is ‘a very smart thing to do. And a good investment.’ Wherever humans live at high population densities, making unsustainable demands on natural systems, he notes, you eventually see ecological breakdown, unmet needs, and tensions that lead towards conflict. Look at Darfur. Look at Rwanda. Look at Zimbabwe. (p. 20)*

This theme continues at some level throughout the rest of the articles in the issue. While an environmental security framework of understanding may work in some instances, it tends to gloss over the myriad of other factors that lead to conflict. Hartmann (2001) has raised several concerns about the environmental security perspective, including tendencies: to view population growth as the root cause of resource scarcity and conflict, to localize blame for conflict; and to accept current resource distribution models as a given. Fairhead (2001: 213) also has pointed out that when linking conflict with environmental issues, “there is a temptation to pursue the often-supposed link between poverty and environmental decline (the downward spiral) to more violent conclusions.” The flipside to the classic neo-Malthusian and environmental security arguments in Africa include: that broader political economic conditions and policies often contribute to local resource conflicts (Bassett 1988); that low population densities and dispersed settlements have been identified as impediments to agricultural development (Turner, Hyden and Kates, 1993; Tiffen, Mortimore and Gichuki 1994); that factors other than population density and poverty are more strongly linked to environmental degradation (Logan 1991; Leach and Mearns 1996; Moseley 2001, 2005), and that Africa is rich in traditions and mechanisms that facilitate the peaceful management of resources (Ostrom, Walker and Gardner 1992).

### A FAILURE TO PORTRAY AFRICA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

It is difficult to understand any region without acknowledging its connections to the rest of the world. Yet, *NG Magazine* seems to be overwhelmingly focused on local actors in its presentation of Africa's development dilemmas. When it does discuss outside actors, they are presented as largely benign or positive. In "Oil Boon," an article about the development of newly discovered oil in Chad, as well as the 'resource curse' idea in other areas of Africa, one would have thought there might be ample discussion of global consumption and commodity chains. To be fair, ExxonMobil (the major company working in Chad) is discussed at some length in this article. But the company's work is described in an entirely positive light whereas any and all problems are attributed to the Chadian government. Furthermore, no mention is made of the Bush Administration's maneuvering in the region since 9/11/01 (see, e.g., Booker and Colgan 2004) or of Americans inability to reign in their own energy consumption. It is not that African governments are entirely innocent, but discussing resource extraction in Africa without reference to the rest of the world leaves readers to circumscribe African problems and disavow any real connections between themselves and the region.

### PRIVILEGING WILDLIFE AND NATURAL AREAS OVER HUMAN LIVELIHOODS

In the issue's concluding article, David Quammen notes that "Africa is an extraordinary repository of wildlife. It is the greatest of places for great beasts" (p. 128). He then describes how the "survival of Africa's wildlife ... [has happened] ... amid constant human presence" (p. 129). This second statement is particularly ironic given the issue's transparent support for a strict preservationist or park-based approach. Natural areas are often described as places that must be protected from local people. The well-being of wildlife is consistently highlighted whereas motives of peoples living on the outskirts of these parks are almost always described in negative terms (these are poor peasants, greedy poachers and corrupt government officials). Of course, the degree to which parks and nature reserves preserve natural landscapes is up for considerable debate. Scholars such as Cronon (1996) and Leach and Mearns (1996) have described the historical role of humans in land-

scape creation and the social construction of nature. Furthermore, the livelihood consequences of excluding local people from parks and natural areas has been highlighted in recent geographical scholarship (e.g., Neumann 1998; Twyman 2000; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003).

A good example of unmitigated support for a strict preservationist approach is the unproblematized presentation of parks and elephant populations. In "Return to Zambia," writer Alexandra Fuller praises local efforts to safeguard elephants. She describes how some poachers have begun to protect wildlife and that elephant populations are now recovering. The idea that there could be an elephant overpopulation problem is not addressed directly (a problem in other parts of southern Africa (Wiseman, Page and O'Connor 2004; Getz and Baxter 2005; Koro 2005)). She does note that "the animals are spilling across the park's boundaries, and the villagers of Mukungule beat gongs and plant fences of chili peppers in an effort to keep the beasts from sailing like battleships through their crops at night..." (p. 118). Interestingly, however, the idea that elephants are difficult and dangerous to cohabitate with is not really pursued. Rather, local opposition to the park is attributed to other issues: "[d]isplaced poachers, corrupt officials and a few territorial local tour operators all felt ... that the protection of the park had gone too far" (p. 118). While North Americans express concerns about public safety when the occasional bear or mountain lion wanders into one of their cities, NG Magazine argues that Africans know how to live amidst large dangerous animals ("African people ... [learned] ... the possibility and rightness of co-existing with other formidable species" (p. 129)), leaving only the common African stereotypes of poverty, corruption and greed to explain the killing of wildlife.

### **CONCLUSION: ON ACADEMIC GEOGRAPHY AND NG MAGAZINE**

There are many views within geography about the nature and causes of environmental change in Africa, about the import of local versus non-local forces, and about the relative importance of human and non-human elements in any given landscape. Perhaps more so than any other discipline, geography is an exceptionally broad one that spans the physical-social science divide and positivist — post positivist chasm. The result is that geographers, I would argue, are constantly challenged by their peers to account for multiple perspectives. This has led to a cre-

ative tension that has allowed geographers to play a leading role in cutting edge thinking about human-environment questions.

NG Magazine, despite its title and historical connections to our discipline, does not draw upon heavily, or reflect in a significant way, the views of geographers. In a word search of NG Magazine issues published since 1996 (done via the National Geographic Society Website), hits for the following disciplinary tags were as follows (in descending order): biologist (284), paleontologist (77), ecologist (68), anthropologist (66), political scientist (45), botanist (36), geographer (27), economist (17) and sociologist (6). As such, current geographical scholarship is not reflected in NG Magazine because geographers are rarely called upon to be authors or cited in articles. In fact, scientists who focus their attention on the biophysical side of human-environment interactions, and operate largely in the positivist tradition (biologists, ecologists and botanists), constitute the vast majority of cited experts.

Under such circumstances, it would be quite tempting to disavow any connections between the magazine and geography, merely using the Africa issue in the classroom as a postmodern punching bag — a contemporary example of hegemonic discourse. To the contrary, I think we, as Africanists and academic geographers, should actually engage with the magazine. NG Magazine not only carries the name of our discipline, but it is a powerful vehicle for disseminating information to the US public about Africa. We ignore it at our peril.



**William G. Moseley** is an assistant professor of geography, and former coordinator of the African Studies Program, at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN USA. His research interests include political ecology, tropical agriculture, environment and development policy, livelihood security, and Africa. He is the editor of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial African Issues* (McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2004) and *African Environment and Development: Rhetoric, Programs, Realities* (Ashgate, 2004). His research in Africa has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the US Dept of Education Fulbright-Hays program.

Direct enquiries to [moseley@macalester.edu](mailto:moseley@macalester.edu)

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