

Conflict and Cooperation: Making the Case for Environmental Pathways to Peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region

Authoritarian regimes, genocides, and civil wars have plagued countries in the Great Lakes Region¹ in recent years. The region's nations rely heavily on natural resources—water, minerals, land—for economic development, as well as for the livelihoods of their people, and many of the region's conflicts are connected to these resources or other environmental factors. Water (as in the Zambezi and Nile River basins), minerals (as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), fertile land (as in Zambia), or illegal hunting (as in the Virunga National Park) are pressured by degradation and demand, which can spur conflict. Many people in rural Africa still live off the land and depend on what nature offers for their survival. Unfortunately, many of the continent's gravest conflicts occur in these same areas.

But the extreme dependence on the environment can be an asset, not a curse. Political boundaries cut across ecosystems, creating cross-border dependencies that establish a common unifying force: the need to conserve natural resources. This mutual interest can facilitate dialogue and bring warring groups together to collaborate. Such efforts offer greater hope for lasting peace, as they are able to address the root causes of conflict, while also improving the capacity to prevent and resolve it. The environment thus becomes not just a cause of violence, but also a tool for making peace.

Sharing such crucial resources creates an enormous incentive to cooperate, and brings stakeholders to the negotiating table. In “The Case for Environmental Peacemaking,” Ken Conca (2002) explains that cooperation over natural resources establishes a relationship of collaboration so critical to all parties that violent conflict seems less plausible. Peace, he suggests, should no longer be considered a lack of violence, but the existence of a shared identity among parties with “shared resource systems and ecological interdependencies.” If states reach this degree of interdependence over critical natural resources, they may be less likely to resort to violent conflict.

Opportunities for environmental peacemaking in the Great Lakes Region have not yet been isolated, even though there are many examples of cooperation at the national, regional, sub-regional, and local levels. With its prevalence of conflict and transboundary ecosystems, the Great Lakes Region could be a potential model for a future worldwide initiative in environmental peacemaking.

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The Great Lakes Region of Africa



The Context for Environmental Peacemaking in the Great Lakes Region

While peacebuilding and sustainable environmental management have not been directly linked in Great Lakes Region programs, many initiatives aim either at building peace or at engendering sustainable environmental management. The challenge is to link the two, thus using environmental management initiatives to build cohesive communities. While there is potential for leveraging peace through sustainable management of environmental resources in the Great Lakes Region, it is first necessary to understand the local, national, sub-regional, regional, and international contexts.

Countries in the Great Lakes Region are parties to numerous international² and regional³ environmental agreements. These legal instruments are complemented by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which recognizes that the vast and complex range of issues affecting the region's environment requires a combination of comprehensive initiatives. NEPAD has created an action plan to address the region's environmental challenges while also combating poverty and promoting socio-economic development. Under this plan, African countries agree to maintain the integrity of the environment and to ensure the sustainable use of their natural resources through partnerships with the international community.



A fisherman tries his luck at catching fresh water fish at the "Lac aux oiseaux" (Birds' Lake) in the Kirundo province of Burundi (© 2003 Isabelle Walhin, courtesy of Photoshare)

These initiatives, in conjunction with sub-regional groups like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought (IGAD), provide an institutional base for integrating the environment and conflict into the mainstream debate. Over and above these agreements, the countries of the Great Lakes Region have adopted principles for sustainable environmental management contained in the Rio Declaration and the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Action.

But state-level cooperation is not enough: effectively using environmental pathways to peace requires directly involving a diverse group of stakeholders. Getting local actors to buy into the process is critical to the development of building peace through sustainable environmental management. Cooperation over water resources, for example, requires not only the participation of the basin states, but also their citizens. Similarly, the use of forests and wildlife as pathways to peace requires the involvement of both the national wildlife authorities and the people that depend on the resources. Citizens of local communities that live with and depend on

the natural resources at issue will be more likely to support and take ownership of environmental peacemaking initiatives when permitted to take part in the decision-making process.

Local governance institutions could provide a starting point for environmental peacemaking in the Great Lakes Region. Although they may be informal or poorly articulated, such forms of governance provide the basic structure for community management of environmental resources. Since these norms are already embedded in the community's way of life, they represent an important link between conflict prevention and environmental management at the local level, and could be promising forums for environmental peacemaking programs.

From Rhetoric to Action

At the international level, the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Division of Early Warning and Assessment has initiated a process for integrating environmental management into peacebuilding. Through this Environment and Conflict Prevention Initiative, UNEP has documented institutions engaged in environmental management and those engaged in peacebuilding at the local, regional, and national levels. It found a lack of linkages among these institutions in the Great Lakes Region, despite the fact that their mandates overlap, as both types seek to alleviate poverty and ensure economic development.

To forge that connection, UNEP has helped institutionalize environmental peacemaking in the region by mainstreaming sustainable environment into the themes of the International Conference on the African Great Lakes Region, which is an ongoing process seeking lasting solutions to conflict. The Final Declaration of the Conference in December 2004 recognized and incorporated environmental issues as a cross-cutting theme in four key themes: peace and security; democracy and good governance; economic development; and regional integration and humanitarian and social issues. The heads of state from 11 countries asserted that they are "fully aware of the link between peace,



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environment, and development” (First Summit of Heads of State and Government, 2004). Early drafts of the declaration did not mention the environment, but discussions among UNEP, experts, and government representatives led the conference to add the environment to the high-level statement. Heads of state are expected to develop action plans based on the conclusions of the conference.

This recognition provides political capital that can be used to link the environment to peace and security in the Great Lakes Region. This capital is further amplified by the NEPAD Action Plans on the environment and on conflict. Additionally, sub-regional groupings such as SADC, EAC, and IGAD can further define the appropriate contexts for linking environment and security, using their existing platforms for environmental issues.

Local groups, too, can be engaged in environmental peacemaking, as evidenced by the Nile Basin Initiative’s (NBI) efforts to involve diverse groups of stakeholders. Seven countries in the Great Lakes Region are participating in the NBI, which seeks to bring the basin countries together to jointly manage the Nile resources for the benefit of all. NBI’s projects can build cohesion among communities, and thus peace, in the region. Expanding the forum to include stake-

holders at lower levels creates a broader arena for cooperative solutions to regional environmental challenges, allowing different groups along the Nile, outside of the national governments, to meet to discuss common issues.

A cross-border biodiversity project in East Africa also offers potential for peacebuilding. To reduce biodiversity loss, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and UNEP’s Global Environment Facility (working with national environment agencies in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) selected four biodiversity hotspots that lie on political borders: Rakai-Bukoba between Uganda and Tanzania; Karamoja-Turkana between Kenya and Uganda; Kajiado-Monduli between Kenya and Tanzania; and Same-Taita Taveta between Tanzania and Kenya. The countries’ national environmental agencies, along with the EAC organs using the EAC Protocol on the Environment, are working with local communities on each side of the border to discuss forest management issues and identify inconsistencies between national policies and local cooperative norms. These interactions could yield peace dividends, as participants build relationships and identify their common environmental interests.

The Albertine Rift, which spans several states⁴ in the Great Lakes Region, is a transboundary ecosystem with environmental peacemaking potential. The highly populated area contains multiple protected zones, as well as the habitat of mountain gorillas. In October 2005, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda signed a declaration establishing a shared management system consisting of joint patrols, training, animal trafficking law enforcement, and conservation efforts. This environmental cooperation could lead to collaboration on additional issues.

Conclusion

Natural resources should be considered vehicles for peacebuilding, rather than solely sources of conflict. The Great Lakes Region, torn by war and highly dependent on natural resources, is an ideal place to study and implement environ-



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mental peacemaking. Key questions for future research—already underway by UNEP’s Environment and Conflict Prevention Initiative—include:

- Are environmental issues a factor in initiating and prolonging conflicts in the Great Lakes Region?
- What role does environmental governance play in conflict prevention and management?
- What is the role of national, sub-regional, regional, and international environmental institutions as carriers of governance norms for conflict prevention and management?
- What is the impact of conflict on the environment?
- Can tools used for sustainable environmental management be used for conflict prevention and management?
- To what extent can environmental management be used as a pathway to peace?

A deeper understanding of the links between sustainable environmental management and conflict will contribute to sustainable development, democratization, and equity. It improves access to resources and the sharing of benefits, within and across generations. It also broadens the field of players in the search for peace. Successful environmental peacemaking demands that resources are managed equitably and in a sustainable manner, requiring inclusive and participatory environmental decision-making processes and the recognition of environmental resource rights for all.⁵

Notes

1. Here, the Great Lakes Region includes Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia (see map).
2. Most are parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, among others.
3. Countries in the region are also signatory members of the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, and the Bamako Convention on the Ban of the Import into Africa and the Control of Transboundary Movement and Management of Hazardous Wastes within Africa.
4. Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.
5. This article was originally published by the Wilson Center’s Africa Program, in collaboration with the Environmental Change and Security Program, in November 2006. See www.wilsoncenter.org/africa for more information.

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