Conservation in a Code Orange World: Why the Environment Matters to Security

A long time ago -- long before 9-11 or Al Qaeda, more than a decade before the fall of the Berlin Wall in fact -- Lester Brown, one of our contemporary environmental prophets, made a prediction that would prove to be uncomfortably prescient.

He said the time was approaching -- and I'm paraphrasing here -- when national security would have little to do with military strength, when threats would arise less from the relationship of nation to nation than from the relationship of man to nature.

Lester was talking about "transformational diplomacy" 30 years ahead of its time.

I thought I'd open with that observation just on the off chance you might be wondering why someone from an organization whose logo is a cute and cuddly panda bear is standing here tonight, talking to you about national security.

Thirty years ago, those with lesser vision than Lester—and that probably includes most of us—would have been hard pressed to see a connection between conservation and security.

But times certainly have changed... The end of the Cold War... The transformational impact of globalization on nearly every sphere of human enterprise... The ebbing authority of nation states... And humanity's

increasingly heavy footprint on the resource capacity of our planet...

All these things have helped to redefine security, which these days has a different, evolving and much more complex meaning than it did 30, 20 or even 10 years ago.

Another perceptive person, Jessica Matthews, described this evolution a few years ago, when she wrote about the emerging notion of "human security" -- a notion that security no longer flows downward, from a nation's foreign relations and military strength, but upwards from the conditions of daily life, from a community's access to a sustainable supply of food, water, fuel and other basic necessities.

And in the developing world particularly, that access, and the security that flows from it, has a great deal to do with conservation.

Along with this new notion of security come new definitions of what constitute threats. No longer is the presence, or absence, of armed conflict the only measure.

According to figures from the World Health Organization, more than 10 times as many people die from diseases related to poor sanitation than are killed every year in armed conflicts.

Chronic poverty, hunger, disease, resource depletion, biodiversity loss and ecosystem

collapse... These are real threats that cannot be resolved by force of arms. Guns are no defense against global warming.

Throughout the 60’s, 70’s and even into the 80’s, most of these challenges tended to be addressed in isolation from one another. Conservation was the business of biologists, not economists or disaster relief experts, who pursued their own quite independent agendas.

Yes, we paid lip service to the increasingly apparent connections between our issues and respective disciplines. Yet for the most part, we were like the passengers on proverbial ships in the night, plying the same waters of the developing world as we

passed one another with little more than a wave of the hand and a backward glance.

With the end of the Cold War and the onset of globalization, all this began to change.

As East-West confrontation gave way to a vastly more complex and multi-dimensional North-South dialogue, the static bi-polar view prevailing since the end of World War II suddenly dissolved into a kaleidoscopic variety of issues and regional conflicts, often with profound social, economic and ecological consequences.

The more humanistic, holistic view of security advanced by Matthews and others was a product of this fermenting new world order. During this period, in the 80’s and

90’s, conservationists and economists also found common cause in the concept of sustainable development.

And in the security arena, analysts were focusing on the emerging field of “environmental security,” which explored both the links between resource depletion and conflict and conservation’s potential role in preventing conflict through sustainable development and innovative concepts such as peace parks.

And then came that crisp, clear morning in September when, staring in horror and disbelief at our television sets, we realized that it was not only information, trade and finance that had gone global.

And since that pivotal day, another change has occurred – one that represents both a major challenge and, if we manage it properly, an opportunity.

Prior to 9-11, the main priority for major international assistance programs — the kind provided by funders like the World Bank and USAID — was development. Development and disaster relief comprised the lion's share of aid budgets, excluding military assistance programs.

Disaster relief, we know all too well, is still a growing business. But today, and ever since 9-11, the focus for non-disaster related assistance has shifted sharply from development to security and the stabilization of failed or failing states.

As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted when she outlined the concept of "transformational diplomacy" to foreign service majors at Georgetown University last month, the greatest threats now are "more within states than between them."

The new challenge, as she conceived it, lies in bolstering the stability of weak and failing states through democratic and other internal reforms.

For those of us who subscribe to a more humanistic definition of security, the good news here is that the new emphasis on resolving the causes of conflicts within states, as opposed to between them, could lead to a reinvigorated commitment to

sustainable development. Certainly, there are aspects of the new and evolving security paradigm that sound more and more like sustainable development every day.

Yet there is still a troubling disconnect in the current debate -- at least between the way policy makers and security analysts conceive it and conservationists, among other front-line workers in the field, perceive it.

In her speech, Secretary Rice talked about threats to stability like terrorism, weapons proliferation, drug smuggling and disease. Nowhere did she mention environmental degradation.

To be fair, conservationists haven't exactly been eager to speak up. While relief and development agencies have been quicker to assess the implications of the new focus on stabilization, conservationists seem loathe to even acknowledge its existence.

Mostly, I think, this reflects a conviction that, as scientists, we must remain above the fray of political agendas or issues driven by any one nation's diplomatic or military interest.

This discomfort is understandable. Yet we will be ill equipped to meet the challenges of conservation at the dawn of the 21st Century -- of conservation in a Code Orange world -- unless we acknowledge these new

realities and do what we can to help shape the debate over assistance priorities.

So what are some of links between conservation and conflict; between resource depletion, instability, armed struggle and, ultimately, even terrorism?

That resources can be — and throughout history have been -- a source of conflict is pretty obvious. Indeed, the word “rivalry” derives from the notion of resource conflict. Its Latin root is “revalis,” a term referring to “one who uses the same river as another.”

Resources can cause or exacerbate conflict when they are overused or become scarce. Darfur, which began as a conflict over water

resources and escalated into one of the most genocidal conflicts of our time, is a prime example. Darfur, of course, subsequently metastasized into a far more complex conflict. But the spark that ignites a fire often has little to do with the fuel that feeds it.

Nor is scarcity the only trigger for resource-related conflict. In places with weak governance systems, resource abundance can also promote conflict, especially if the resources are valuable and easy to loot. Timber, ivory, rhino horn and conflict diamonds all fall into this category, with criminal syndicates controlling much of $140 billon illegal timber trade and insurgencies

and terror groups increasingly profiting from the slaughter of endangered species.

Often these commodities are controlled by the same syndicates that run drugs and arms. All are smuggled through the same networks, with the profits of one illegal activity offsetting the costs of another in a criminal cycle that weakens legal norms, destroys the natural resource base and increases economic and social dislocation around the world.

So, how do we untangle this mess? Needless to say, conservation doesn't have all the answers. But, donning my WWF hat for a moment, I want to give you a couple of examples, drawn from our experience, of the

ways in which it can contribute to conflict abatement.

The rain forests of the Congo Basin, second only to the Amazon in size, cover almost half of central Africa and are home to nearly 12,000 known species of plants and animals, including lowland gorillas and most of the world's remaining population of forest elephants. Traversing six national borders, the area is also home to more than 20 million people, some of whom have a history of not getting along together very well.

Besides the devastation of repeated conflict, ecosystem threats include the illegal wildlife trade, destructive mining

operations and logging that is erasing the rain forest at the rate of 10 million acres per year.

In March of 1999, the heads of state of the Congo Basin countries came together in Yaounde, Cameroon, under the auspices of the World Bank and WWF, to discuss forest conservation. The result was the Yaounde Declaration, the first step in a historic process that would lead to Africa's first regional conservation treaty and to the broader, US-supported Congo Basin Forest Partnership.

Trans-national parks have been established, and more countries – 10 in all, now – have joined. Ministerial level and working group discussions are under way.

While these are conservation agreements, they are helping to set an extraordinary precedent. For the first time, provincial officials on opposite sides of tense borders are sitting down with one another, talking about ways in which they can cooperate.

WWF helps to maintain several of these key parks, spanning parts of the DRC, the Republic of Congo, Cameroon and Gabon. The focus of our conservation work there is the protection of habitat for lowland gorillas, bongos and other endangered species. But it might surprise you to learn that, since 2002, we have also helped to re-settle, and develop livelihoods for, more than 15,000 refugees from conflict.

Another example which, on the face of it, may not sound much like conservation, is a highly successful program we run to bring heating and electricity to poor Nepalese villages through the installation of village biogas plants fueled by locally produced cattle dung.

What do these examples have to do with conservation?

Well, in the Congo, there was a need to relocate people who had taken up refuge in a national park; a need to give them viable livelihood alternatives to illegal poaching.

And in Nepal, we got into the biogas business so that poor communities in need of fuel would not have to cut down their

forests, critical habitat for tigers and Asian rhinos. Immediate benefits: the forests were conserved, human health improved (due to the elimination of wood smoke pollution in the home) and young girls, who used to spend four hours a day gathering firewood in the forest, now had time to go to school (which we helped them to do). The only locals who were unhappy with this arrangement were Maoist guerrillas in the area, who threatened to kill our program manager because his success with the villagers was having a negative impact on their drive to enlist disaffected and impoverished recruits. (He stayed and the Maoists eventually stood down after the villagers threatened to take up arms against

them if he was harmed or his program was shut down.)

Both these examples are successful because they rest on the realization that conservation, security and human advancement are inseparable objectives that can only be achieved in tandem. People will work for conservation only if conservation is first made to work for them.

And so that’s another aspect of our work, for those of you who might have thought that all we do is save pandas.

Conservation, like the world it seeks to save, has changed a lot over the last 50 years.

In the beginning, we were concerned about species and the parks needed to protect them. Then, as our understanding and experience deepened, our focus expanded to include larger landscape, or eco-regional, conservation —- a much broader perspective that embraced things like sustainable development and community empowerment.

Today, we live in a world where the main drivers of biodiversity loss are no longer local but global -- a world in which the demand for resources is already two and a half times greater than what conservation biologists calculate the planet can sustain over the long haul.

The signs of this are rather depressing:

- Over-fishing threatens to deplete our seas of most marine life within our lifetimes.

- Habitat loss, through illegal logging and the increasing demand for agricultural production, is erasing our forests at the rate of more than an acre per second.

- Fed by our insatiable appetite for fossil fuels, global warming threatens to unleash unpredictable but very likely catastrophic changes to our ecosystems and lifestyles.

I don’t mean to sound like a prophet of doom here. There are solutions to these problems. But increasingly they are the kinds of solutions that will require creative, mutli-sectoral partnerships to implement.

Long gone are the days when we could simply stake out a piece of ground, throw up a fence and call something protected. Today, the forces driving biodiversity loss and

resource depletion are large, complex and global in scope. We must respond in kind.

So what can we do? Where do we go from here? In closing, I'll leave you with a couple of ideas distilled from the lessons we think we've learned in 45 years of conservation work around the world.

The first is that democracy can't be imposed from the top down. It has to be built from the ground up. There are no short cuts here. But a good way to start is through programs that help to train and empower local communities to control and sustainably manage their own natural resources.

In the past decade, we've started to see a significant decentralization of control over

forest resources, particularly in Latin America. It's a promising trend, both for conservation and for democratization.

Teaching and empowering local communities to sustainably manage their own resources helps to both improve their livelihoods and increase their immunity to outside, destabilizing influences. It makes them good conservation partners. But more than that, it makes them good citizens.

Secondly, we need to start doing a better job of addressing the complexity of today's problems at multiple levels.

Poverty, hunger, disease, resource depletion, environmental degradation and instability are no longer stand alone

threats. The growing weight of human demand, combined with the compressive effects of globalization, have fused them together. They intersect, aggravate, agitate and beget one another in a complex, interactive dynamic that needs to be addressed in a multi-disciplinary fashion.

Partnerships here are the key. Partnerships between development, relief and conservation groups. Partnerships between NGOs, local community stakeholders and governments.

And last but not least, partnerships with multinational corporations, the behemoths of globalization whose size and impact make them by far the biggest players in this game.

How big? Here's one measure: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) spent about $2 billion in the developing world last year. Multilateral and bilateral funders like the World Bank, the FAO and USAID together spent about $70 billion. But private sector companies currently invest some $230 billion per year in the economies of developing countries – more than three times all the other investment sources combined.

The investments go in – and the resources get sucked out. Fully 80 percent of all agricultural and natural resource commodities produced in the world are purchased by just 300 to 500 buyers.

Wal-Mart purchases 10 percent of the world's cotton; Coca-Cola buys 5.6 percent of all its sugar. Nearly half of all the whitefish caught in the Bering Sea, America's largest fishery, ends up between a bun, served with a side of fries, at MacDonald's.

Engaging these mega-players to make commodity sourcing more sustainable is among the most critically important challenges we face.

There is some progress here, by the way. Corporate giants like Coca-Cola, Unilever, Kraft and Wal-Mart are joining agricultural commodity roundtables to talk about ways to reduce the environmental impact of such things as soy, sugar, cotton and shrimp production.

Wal-Mart has even put its suppliers on notice that, within five years, it intends to sell only fish certified as sustainably caught by the Marine Stewardship Council.

The terrestrial equivalent of the MSC, the Forest Stewardship Council, receives major support from Home Depot. And besides being a leader in hybrid fuel technology, Toyota is working with WWF on an ambitious project to turn the Galapagos into a 21st Century model of clean energy use.

But much more needs to be done. If corporations hope in the future to retain their position of societal dominance, they must be able to demonstrate the benefits of

that position not just to their shareholders, but to society as a whole.

Cut loose from the bi-polar moorings of the Cold War, our world clearly is still in a state of transition, with all the uncertainty and confusion that implies. Certainly there are new threats and challenges that our diplomatic and security analysts are busy drafting new agendas to meet.

What I have tried to do tonight is to give you some sense of how these challenges look from a conservation perspective – and how conservation itself is evolving to meet them.

The ever more complex nature of these challenges requires all of us to think outside our respective boxes; to find smarter, more strategic and more holistic solutions to the common threats we face. Moving forward, conservation must be more about building bridges than erecting fences.

Donning my WWF hat again, it’s certainly fair to say that we’re not your grandmother’s conservation organization any more.

But just in case she asks, please tell her that, yes, we still save pandas.
Thank you.