

Editorial

Co-ministering the Environment

There are many advocacy groups that work toward environmental protection in Africa, but most people probably only remember the trans-national non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace (<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/>) and the Environmental Defense Fund (<http://www.edf.org/home.cfm>) whose resources are firmly rooted in affluent countries of the Western hemisphere. Although the global environmental activities of these organizations are laudable, there are many individual Africans whose advocacy at the local level should command our attention, and many have sacrificed their wellbeing for the cause [Ogunseitan, Dele. 2009. Prizing the Environment. African Journal of Environmental Science and Technology, 3(4):1]. In many cases these individuals and small groups stake their positions against official doctrine or governmental development plans that endanger environmental quality. To reduce environmental conflict, it is important that government officials are knowledgeable about the environmental impacts of policies that may at first seem remote from environmental systems. Since its establishment in 1985, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) has been the major forum for engaging national representatives in cogent trans-boundary environmental issues that affect all Africans. AMCEN has focused on implementing four mandates (<http://www.unep.org/roa/Amcen/>):

1. To provide advocacy for environmental protection in Africa
2. To ensure that basic human needs are met adequately and in a sustainable manner
3. To ensure that social and economic development is realized at all levels
4. To ensure that agricultural activities and practices meet the food security needs of the region.

African citizens privileged to elect leaders who understand that protection of environmental quality is a crucial path toward improving public health and economic prosperity will likely benefit from being represented at AMCEN by astute ministers of the environment who appreciate the incomparable advantages of networks and advocacy coalition. It is hoped that the co-production of environmental knowledge in these forums are translated into active protective programs at the local level. AMCEN has traditionally been instrumental in agitating for regional support of major international initiatives, including the development of an environmental initiative under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (<http://www.nepad.org/2005/files/home.php>). Moreover, AMCEN coordinates African vigilance regarding consequential international frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The location of the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in Nairobi, Kenya has certainly been beneficial to the work of AMCEN, and it is fitting that UNEP has served as its secretariat since the beginning. This close proximity has yielded important collaborations such as the "Africa Environment Outlook" (<http://www.grida.no/publications/other/aeo/>), and the remarkable new publication entitled "Africa: Atlas of our Changing Environment" which documents major environmental challenges facing the continent as well as cases where scientific knowledge and technology have reversed the course of environmental disasters (<http://www.unep.org/dewa/africa/AfricaAtlas/>) (Figure 1).

In Africa, it is not unusual for international unions to start with strong agendas, only to become diluted over time due to political over-maneuverings and chronic underfunding. These problems often result in impotent communiqués, reports, and action plans. AMCEN has escaped this fate for most of its quarter

of a century existence, but there are signs of strain associated with its complex organizational structure and persistent inadequacy of funds. For AMCEN to realize its full potential, it must remain true to its mandate to serve as a trans-boundary organization where global environmental issues are reframed to tease out issues of urgency for African nations – and local environmental problems that emerge in Africa are quickly brought to the international arena, if there is a recognizable potential for global impact. These tasks require sustained personnel and financial resources which should come with increased public confidence in AMCEN's agenda and capacity for project follow-through.



Figure 1. Dramatic environmental change in Africa as documented in the book “Africa: Atlas of our Changing Environment” co-sponsored by AMCEN and UNEP. The top panels show the success story of wetlands restoration around Diawling National Park in Mauritania spanning the period from 1979 (left panel) to 2006 (right panel); whereas the bottom panel details drastic urbanization and concomitant depletion of natural landscape on Cape Vert in Senegal between 1942 and 2007.

Courtesy of UNEP (<http://www.unep.org/dewa/africa/AfricaAtlas/>)

Oladele A. Ogunseitan, Ph.D., M.P.H.
 Program in Public Health & School of Social Ecology
 University of California, Irvine
 CA 92697, USA
 Editor-in-Chief