A century in the making: The journey of protected areas from the cradle to becoming the candle

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Abstract

Exactly 150 years have elapsed since the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in the USA, the first of its kind globally. Few Americans could have anticipated that this idea would once and for all spark a revolutionary shift in humanity’s relationship with nature and wildlife worldwide. Currently, Protected Areas (PAs) are widely recognized as the best available means to ensure the survival and recovery of native and threatened animals and plant species. If success in conservation was solely based on the number or size of PAs, conservationists would have ample reason for celebration. However, the mainstreaming and adaptation of the PAs concept to various countries and regions, each having its socio-economic, cultural, and ecological realities have become room for both innovations and challenges in the conservation sector. Almost a full century since the establishment of the first NP on the African continent in 1925, this paper anticipatedly examines the PAs systems of the first three countries to embrace the NPs movement on the continent: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda. We have used a probabilistic index method to comparatively analyse quantitative and qualitative data, and assess the key indicators of the conservation policy, institutions, and PAs network in these countries alongside the USA. This approach enables us to discern divergent trajectories, detect potential shortcomings, identify vulnerabilities, contextualise these findings, and draw recommendations for future development. In contrast to the rather longstanding, stable, and relatively well-established U.S. PAs system, this research reveals frequent policy instruments amendments and managing institutions reshuffles, numerous cases of overlapping goals, conflicting missions, a rather static PAs typology, the over-reliance on single species exacerbated by a growing focus on revenue generation tendencies at the expense of the core conservation mission in the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda.

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