

## Editorial

# The Local Language of Global Environmental Knowledge

Tapping into local knowledge of the environment is extremely important for the sustainability and effectiveness of technology transfer schemes in aid of environmental quality. Therefore, it can be informative to explore the roots and meanings of the words people use to describe their environment, as this often says a lot about their perception of the relationship between people and nature and among adjacent cultures. According to Childs<sup>1</sup>, there are more than 2000 languages in Africa, distributed among six major linguistic families (Figure 1). We should expect that each of these languages has an equivalent to the English word “environment” which has several interpretations, but in our context, meaning more or less the aggregate of biotic, abiotic, social, and cultural factors and conditions that influence human life and communities. It is not surprising that the major language families in Africa align with environmental regimes shaped mostly by climate and the availability of natural resources that facilitate colonization of habitats and cultural homogeneity (Figure 1). However, the historic flow of socio-cultural and linguistic families has been enriched by the superimposition of foreign languages such as Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese, each of these with their own conceptualization of “environment” and its interpretations. For this reason, it is not likely that globally celebrated event such as the “World Environment Day” will have the same meaning in all parts of Africa, and we should care very much about how local developments shape the adoption of global frameworks on the environment.

The World Environment Day (WED), celebrated on June 5<sup>th</sup> of every year since its establishment by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972, is meant to increase the awareness of the inter-dependence of human societies and nature, especially given the intensified influence of localized human action on global environmental conditions. The theme for this year (2007) turned out to be “Melting Ice p a Hot Topic?” which aimed to focus attention on the effects of climate change on polar ecosystems and communities. It begs the question why Africans should care about the polar ice caps melting. But we should. Certainly, the disappearing snows of Kilimanjaro have become the poster case for the unnerving projects of climate change (Figure 2), but most Africans have never touched snow. In many countries, the theme for WED-2007 was covered faithfully in alignment with the global framing, but there were important additions that reflect what local communities care about, including tree planting, water quality, and biodiversity (Table 1). That some local themes for the 2007 WED is important because it underscores the resilience of what is important locally despite the shifting global agenda. The capacity to re-interpret global frames using local language should be encouraged throughout the world. That is the only way to engage local knowledge effectively in the service of global sustainability.

**Table 1.** African Country Themes for World Environment Day, 2007

| COUNTRY        | THEME FOR “WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY”, JUNE 5TH, 2007 .                                       |
|----------------|---|
| BENIN          | Waste is wealth   |
| BOSTWANA       | Indigenous knowledge to create a sustainable environment in a changing world.             |
| CAMEROON       | Planting trees  |
| CONGO REPUBLIC | <b>Melting Ice – A Hot Topic?</b>   |
| EGYPT          | Think global, act local   |
| GABON          | Ecological chain of the water cycle   |
| GHANA          | Global Change and Energy Crisis, Whose Responsibility?                                    |
| KENYA          | <b>Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign</b><br>Environmental conservation          |
| LIBERIA        | <b>Melting Ice – A Hot Topic?</b><br>impact of climate change on the Liberian environment |

<sup>1</sup> Childs, G.T. 2003. *An Introduction to African Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin.

Table 1. contd.

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| LIBYA        | Environmental responsibilities, especially in the field of oil & gas industry.<br>Endemic biodiversity<br><b>Melting Ice – a Hot Topic?</b>   |
| MAURITIUS    | Global warming  |
| MOZAMBIQUE   | <b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic?</b>   |
| NAMBIA       | Nurturing of the trees  |
| NIGERIA      | "The Drops of Life"<br>Art in Environment<br>Environmental awareness through electronic media<br><b>Melting Ice – a Hot Topic?</b>  |
| SENEGAL      | The importance of respecting and protecting the environment and living in harmony with it.  |
| SEYCHELLES   | <b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic?</b>   |
| SOMALIA      | Stop the war; war destroys the environment.   |
| SOUTH AFRICA | Eco- Design for Competitive Advantage<br>Touch Africa Lightly<br>The Wolf in the Forest<br>An Inconvenient Truth<br>Afro-centric Sustainable Development within the Global Village<br>Planting Trees<br><b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic?</b> |
| TANZANIA     | Inauguration of a new environmental corner  |
| TUNISIA      | Melting Ice on the Rwenzori Mountains - a key future Resource based Conflict.   |
| UGANDA       | <b>Melting Ice - A Hot Topic</b>  |
| ZAMBIA       |   |

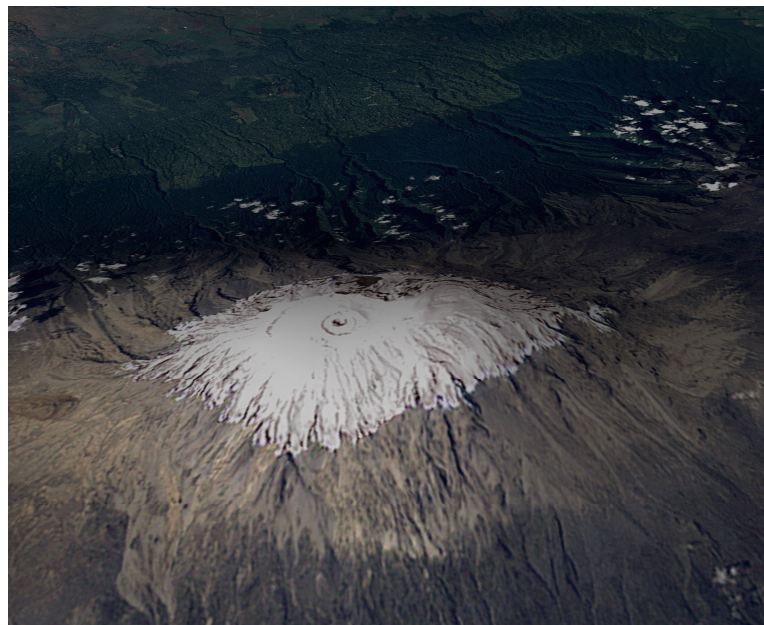


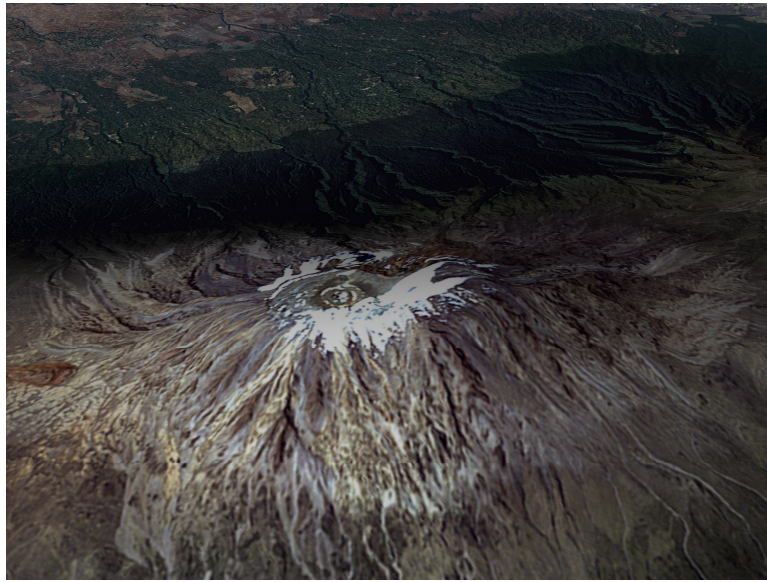
Figure 1. Map of African language families and local words used in reference to general understanding of "environment". The distribution of language families follows the classification scheme of Joseph H. Greenberg<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:African\\_language\\_families.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:African_language_families.svg)

**Table 2.** History of World Environment Day themes

| Year | Theme for World Environment Day  |
|------|--|
| 2007 | Melting Ice – Hot Topic?   |
| 2006 | Deserts and Desertification – Don't Desert Drylands!                           |
| 2005 | Green Cities – Plan for the Planet!  |
| 2004 | Wanted! Seas and Oceans – Dead or Alive?                                       |
| 2003 | Water – Two Billion People are Dying for It!                                   |
| 2002 | Give Earth a Chance  |
| 2001 | Connect with the World Wide Web of Life  |
| 2000 | The Environment Millennium - Time to Act                                       |
| 1999 | Our Earth - Our Future - Just Save It!   |
| 1998 | For Life on Earth - Save Our Seas  |
| 1997 | For Life on Earth  |
| 1996 | Our Earth, Our Habitat, Our Home   |
| 1995 | We the Peoples: United for the Global Environment                              |
| 1994 | One Earth One Family   |
| 1993 | Poverty and the Environment - Breaking the Vicious Circle                      |
| 1992 | Only One Earth, Care and Share   |
| 1991 | Climate Change. Need for Global Partnership                                    |
| 1990 | Children and the Environment   |
| 1989 | Global Warming; Global Warning   |
| 1988 | When People Put the Environment First, Development Will Last                   |
| 1987 | Environment and Shelter: More Than A Roof                                      |
| 1986 | A Tree for Peace   |
| 1985 | Youth: Population and the Environment  |
| 1984 | Desertification  |
| 1983 | Managing and Disposing Hazardous Waste: Acid Rain and Energy                   |
| 1982 | Ten Years After Stockholm (Renewal of Environmental Concerns)                  |
| 1981 | Ground Water; Toxic Chemicals in Human Food Chains and Environmental Economics |
| 1980 | A New Challenge for the New Decade: Development Without Destruction            |
| 1979 | Only One Future for Our Children - Development Without Destruction             |
| 1978 | Development Without Destruction  |
| 1977 | Ozone Layer Environmental Concern; Lands Loss and Soil Degradation; Firewood   |
| 1976 | Water: Vital Resource for Life   |
| 1975 | Human Settlements  |
| 1974 | Only one Earth   |

**A**



**B**

**Figure 2.** The melting ice cover of Mount Kilimanjaro (Panel A – 1993; Panel B – 2000) has become the poster case-study for climate change and aligns well the the 2007 theme of the World Environment Day. Images are by courtesy of Jim Williams, NASA GSFC Scientific Visualization Studio, and the Landsat 7 Science Team.

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