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SAVING FORESTS FROM THE GROUND UP

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By Marsha Johnston

From the time he was in high school, all Gerry Hertel ever wanted to do with his life was to be a forester. "I really had no idea what that meant," he says, with a laugh, "except some idyllic idea of riding through the woods looking at stuff and someone pays you to do that. And I didn't particularly like science!"

As it turned out, his idea became reality. Hertel's painstaking legwork surveying overall forest health in eastern Africa has been a critical component of proving to local communities how protecting their forest also sustains their lives.

In 2000, working with support from USAID and in his role as an assistant director for the USDA Forest Service, Hertel began a Forest Health Monitoring project by surveying plots on foot – in Amani Nature Reserve and near Morogoro, Tanzania and Ngangao and Chawia forests, Kenya – rather than via aerial photographs.

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"When the farmer extends his field into the forest you can see it from the air, but you can't see if they are cutting trees out of the forest," he says. "Not many projects look at what's going on inside the forest, whether human impact is happening that you can't measure from the air."

An 'Old World' Approach

John Watkin, grant director for Conservation International's [Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund](#) (CEPF), says ground surveys were the natural choice for Gerry, "who really represents an Old World approach."

Hertel agrees: "People who started working in plant ecology 100 years ago would go out and observe and come up with wonderful conclusions. They just had a feel for [how] things fit together. Scientists today seem to need sophisticated computer models. I'm in between."

Walking through Chawia forest back then, "there were lots of signs of people cutting trees," Hertel recalls. At that time, Hertel acknowledges, local communities had few choices.

"Early on," he recounts, "the head of one of [the local environmental] councils told me, 'We understand we are damaging our environment, but we have no alternative.' People who live around the forest and depend on it have to have some small way of deriving an income so that the things they would get from the forest they can get somewhere else."

In 2004, CEPF provided a grant enabling the Chawia community to start a tree nursery and set up [alternative livelihood](#) projects in butterfly farming, pine resin harvesting and honey and silk production. A couple of years later, the second phase of Hertel's Forest Monitoring Project, funded by CEPF, clearly showed CEPF's efforts to have positively benefitted both the forest and the local community.

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund is a global program that provides grants to nongovernmental organizations and other private sector partners to protect Earth's biologically richest and most endangered areas. As one of the founders, CI administers the program. The other partners are the French Development Agency, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the World Bank.

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Restoring the Forest

"The original forest measurements from the year 2000 showed that community conservation activities had a

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positive qualitative impact on the forest. Gerry's data showed that this forest had been entirely restored, enabling us to relocate the threatened Taita thrush (*Turdus helleri*) into that forest," says CEPF's Watkin.

Adds Hertel, "Where things had improved in the forest, there were community livelihood projects, and the tree nursery."

Perhaps more importantly for the forest's future, its restored health had clearly improved the lives of the local people —providing them more water, for example. Says Hertel, "If the forest stays intact, it will provide the maximum benefit of water over time. Otherwise, as layers get removed, it has less and less capacity to store water."

"Furthermore", says Watkin, "the link between the health of the forest and improved community livelihood activities has been established firmly. Butterfly farming has to get food plants from the forest, and honey production is more productive in the forest than on the periphery," Watkin explains.

"Now the people in Chawia are in a position of being the wise managers of the forest," says Hertel. "I'm confident it can sustain itself, because the people get it."

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