

The Father of Community Conservation

BY BRIAN LAVENDEL

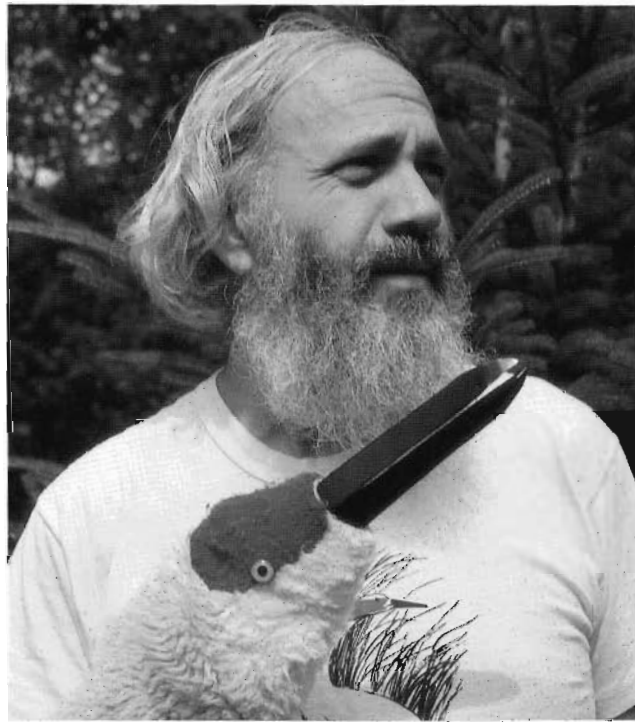
At first glance, biologist Robert Horwich looks more like a bald-headed, gray-bearded statesman or religious figure than a pioneer in international wildlife conservation. But perhaps these very same qualities have helped him become a master at designing programs that serve as models for conservation efforts around the world.

Horwich got his start in community conservation in Central America during the early 1980s. Although he was particularly interested in the langur monkey of India, he couldn't afford to travel there. Instead, he went to Central America, where he could study the black howler—a leaf-eating monkey much like the langur.

After arriving in Belize, Horwich chanced upon the perfect site to study the primates. "I found this place where the monkeys were tame and easy to observe," he recalls. "But I began to see that in other areas the populations weren't in good shape—they were being hunted, and young monkeys were being sold." What's more, the howlers' habitat was being deforested for agricultural uses and for firewood.

Horwich felt that an outside group was unlikely to step in to protect the howler's habitat. And even if the government or a conservation organization were to buy the land, this would not address the villagers' dependence on forest's resources. So he struck upon a simple but elegant plan: Horwich appealed to the landowners and neighboring villagers to protect the monkey's territory. "I asked them to leave strips of forest along the river and between property boundaries," he says. Perhaps no one was more surprised than the zoologist himself when landowners readily agreed.

With Horwich's guidance, local farmers and villagers established a sanctuary for the monkeys. The plan brought together seven villages and more than 100 landowners. Now, 15 years later, the sanctuary, known as the Community Baboon Sanctuary, is a model of community involvement in conservation. The site features a natural-history museum, locally owned bed-and-breakfasts, and guide services. Best of all, the population of monkeys in the sanctuary has more than doubled.



Biologist Robert Horwich wears a whooping-crane puppet, used to keep captive chicks from identifying with humans.

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Horwich calls his strategy community-based conservation because it integrates the needs of local human populations with the requirements of endangered wildlife. "People as well as animals depend on the forest—without it neither can function properly," he says.

Horwich's successful efforts in international conservation have drawn praise and admiration from his peers. Charles Southwick, a retired biology professor at the University of Colorado, says Horwich's genius was to involve the local people in taking responsibility for their environment and to demonstrate to them that "it's in their personal interest" to protect native fauna. Southwick, who calls his

colleague "modest and soft-spoken," explains that Horwich is gifted at relating to people.

Horwich says his interest in unusual animals goes back as long as he can remember. Although he now resides in rural Wisconsin, he grew up in the New York area and still remembers childhood trips to the Bronx Zoo. "I became interested in exotic animals—things such as orangutans and Barbary sheep, or aoudads." His family often went camping and canoeing around the lakes and forests of New York and New Jersey. In those times, natural areas were more plentiful in the Northeast, he recalls. "You felt like you were in the wild."

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In college, Horwich studied zoology, but he quickly became disenchanted. "It was mostly about dead animals," he says. Eager to find a place to apply his curiosity and powers of observation, the young researcher stumbled across the emerging field of animal behavior. Soon he was spending countless hours observing wing movement in mockingbirds or infant development in squirrels and monkeys.

This work helped Horwich develop new techniques for reintroducing rare birds to the wild, using sounds, puppets, and costumes to prepare them to eat, hunt, even fly. Previously most reintroduction efforts consisted mainly in transferring hand-reared birds directly into the wild. Horwich was concerned that these transplanted birds would not be able to adapt to their new environment before succumbing to starvation or winding up as prey. "I became the parent and trained them for release," he explains.

Now Horwich has once again turned his attention to India, where a small but healthy population of golden langur monkeys—probably the most endangered primate in the region—faces the rapid loss of its forest home. Four years ago, he traveled to Assam in northeastern India to investigate the possibility of developing a community-based

protected area. By the end of his second trip, he had helped several groups—including community leaders, local foresters, government groups, and villagers—to establish nurseries to grow trees for replanting forested areas. The groups will share wood produced by the forests, using it for fuel and building—while safeguarding langur.

Horwich maintains that respecting the concerns of local people makes it more likely that conservation efforts will succeed. Too often, he says, well-meaning environmental groups fail to enlist the support of local residents. "Usually the conservation organizations are located in the cities, and they come and say, 'Here is what you need to do,' but the people who live there know the most about the land. They are the best stewards of the land."

But another reason Horwich includes local residents in the conservation process is social justice. Rural people deserve to benefit from their environment, too, he says. If Horwich has his way, we'll see more community-based conservation efforts in years to come. "It's the wave of the future," he predicts.

Environmental journalist Brian Lavendel writes out of Madison, Wisconsin.

To learn more about Horwich's efforts, visit www.communityconservation.org.