Africa's Hunting Heritage – Then & Now

By Willem Frost

"Homo sapiens sapiens" and wildlife have co-existed in Africa for as long as 200,000 years, and wildlife has always been regarded as a free and readily available source of protein.

Until very recently, mankind had to hunt in order to stay alive, using primitive means such as bows and arrows, assegais, clubs, trapping, fire, and pits dug in game trails. African hunters took just enough for their own consumption and the off-take didn't impact on the abundant wildlife populations.

In the 19th century with European colonization, everything started to change. White man brought modern medicine, new technologies, legal and administrative systems. Within a 100 years most of Africa was transformed from traditional, rural tribal societies to modern countries with towns, cities roads, railways, airports, etc. In fact, it's anticipated that by 2030 more than 50% of Africans will live in cities.

One major consequence of this transformation of Africa is the human population explosion, which puts the natural environment under severe pressure, contributing to the significant decline in wildlife numbers. Hunting is, however, still regarded as an absolute traditional right in many parts of Africa.

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In 1652, the first Dutch settlers set foot in the Cape in South Africa. It took them a long time to start venturing into the interior, where they found seemingly endless herds of game – elephant, rhino, zebra, hippopotamus, giraffe, countless antelope species, and predators.

Hunting became a way of life in South Africa and many farmers made a living essentially from hunting. The world demand for ivory and ostrich feathers seemed insatiable; the hides of buffalo, eland and giraffe fetched good prices;, and meat was turned into biltong. It was not long before bluebuck, quagga, and lion became extinct in the then Cape colony.

The 19th century saw a mass emigration of Boers from the Cape Colony to the north, beyond the Orange River, in search of freedom from British rule. They lived off the land and were remarkable hunters. Unfortunately, they didn't write down their hunting experiences and very little is known today about their hunting exploits.

We know, however, that hunters like Carel Tregardt, Jan Viljoen, Piet Jacobs, Piet Botha, Barend Bouwer, Jan Robberse, Marthinus Swarts, Stephanus Oosthuizen and his son Jan, were exceptional hunters and shot many, many elephants and other game. For example, the Boer pioneer and elephant hunter Hendrik van Zyl, who settled near Ghanzi in what is now Botswana, and five others shot 103 elephants one Sunday afternoon in 1877 at a place that became known as "Olifantspan."

When gold and diamonds were discovered in the interior, adventurers from all corners of the earth flocked to the new mining fields. Many of those not successful at mining became fulltime hunters. In those days, "conservation" and "preservation" simply didn't feature in the value system. Rather, the pioneers believed the land had to be cleared and "tamed" so that it could be settled and developed. Wildlife was generally regarded as a nuisance and a threat to agricultural development.

It was only the farsightedness of Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal

Republic that led to the establishment of the first game reserves, Pongola and Sabie, at the end of the 19th century. By then game numbers had already been reduced dramatically, and elephant hunters had to venture much further into the interior to find worthwhile ivory.

By the middle of the 19th century the first European explorers had penetrated into most of "deepest, darkest" Central and East Africa, bringing back fascinating reports of fauna and flora. But it took a while for "white hunters" to have any impact on the vast numbers of game animals.

"Although there certainly was a time of overhunting by white hunters, the hunting industry has evolved and adapted alongside man's progressing social conscience."

The sea route between Britain and its Indian colonies went via the Suez Canal and northern coast of Somaliland (the Land of Punt), providing easy access to the unknown territories that stretched down to Kenya. The Victorian and Edwardian eras in Britain had a well-established hunting tradition, and it wasn't unusual for British army officers stationed in India or elsewhere in the East to venture on amateur exploration and hunting expeditions into the Horn of Africa and British East Africa.

By the end of the century, Central and East Africa's isolation came to an end. Colonized by European powers that established colonial administrations and developed infrastructure, settlers and hunters with modern firearms were not far behind.

Either they were not able to foresee the inevitable vast destruction of game populations, or they didn't care. Elephant hunting became almost an obsession, and the major ports around Africa's coast kept on providing Europe and the Far East with countless shiploads of ivory.

Initially there were few regulations in any of the colonies to control hunting;, and even if there were, the colonies lacked the resources to enforce effective control. The result was a massive slaughter of elephant, rhino, hippo, buffalo, giraffe and other game.

Only in the 20th century were game reserves and national parks established, and the colonial powers managed to establish some degree of control over the "hunting industry."

When the colonies began gaining independence in the mid 20th century, much of the conservation and game management efforts established under colonial rule collapsed. Indiscriminate killing of wildlife with automatic rifles, particularly the AK-47, took place on a large scale.

In Mozambique, for example, FRELIMO soldiers drove into buffalo herds and opened fire with AK-47s. The meat was distributed to villagers in an effort to drum up support for the new Marxist government. The 1970s and 1980s were particularly bad as far as poaching was concerned, as international prices for elephant ivory and rhino horn increased sharply, and politicians (including presidents), civil servants (including those responsible for wildlife management and conservation), and military personnel all scrambled to get their share of the illicit black market. The result was an unprecedented slaughter of wildlife.

In North Africa the wildlife history is not much different. The French troops sent there in the 19th century encountered vast numbers of different gazelles, addax and scimitar-horned oryx. Lions, too, were numerous and took their toll on the flocks and herds of the Arabs and Berbers. The troops, and the settlers who followed on their heels, soon became devoted hunters. Overhunting in a fragile environment had a devastating effect on the game numbers. Algeria and Tunisia's last lions were killed around 1890; in Morocco the last one was reportedly shot in 1922. Today, North Africa's game stocks have been reduced to small fragments of their former ranges and numbers. Most North African species are either locally extinct or on the brink of extinction.

Interestingly, the Portuguese, established in Angola and Mozambique for centuries, were not really hunters and rarely ventured further into the interior, and largely left their great game herds undisturbed.

The hunting safari, as we know it today, became popular with President Theodore Roosevelt's extended safari to East Africa to collect specimens for the Smithsonian Institute. His book, *African Game Trails*, as well others written by earlier hunters and explorers, stimulated interest amongst hunters in the USA and Europe. Soon East Africa's safari industry started to blossom, expanding to Mozambique, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Angola and Bechuanaland.

The term *white hunter* originated in Kenya at the turn of the 20th century, but it is not certain who the first white hunter was. It could have been Alan Black,

Paul Kruger (1825–1904): "Oom Paul" was a frontiersman, warrior, hunter, conservationist, statesman extraordinaire, and fifth president of the South African Republic.

Bill Judd, R.J. Cunninghame, or a Texan by the name of Peregrine Herne – it's not really important. More important is that the safari hunting industry was firmly established in British East Africa and continued to draw scores of hunters from around the world. The safari industry was shocked when the Kenya government banned hunting in 1977.

In South Africa, much of the wildlife outside of the national parks had already disappeared by the time of Roosevelt's safari. In the 1960s, the government took the farsighted decision by privatizing ownership of wildlife on private land. This was a key strategic turning point as far as hunting and conservation was concerned.

Until recently, mankind had to hunt in order to stay alive. Whether using primitive means such as bows and arrows, or modern-day firearms, Cape buffalo has always presented a challenge to meat or trophy hunters alike.

All of a sudden wildlife became valuable, and landowners started protecting their assets. In the years that followed many stock farms were turned into game ranches that derive most of their income from hunting. Wildlife numbers increased dramatically and many species now show an increasing trend in numbers, in contrast to what is happening in most other African countries.

The 20th century was a time of significant changes and major developments, including the emergence of the conservation and wildlife management sciences. Another was a greater focus on and appreciation of hunting ethics and the natural convergence of nature conservation and safari hunting. In this regard, it's essential to distinguish between controlled and legal safari hunting (or trophy hunting or sport hunting or recreational hunting), in which only a limited number of animals are taken by ethical means, and uncontrolled, illegal poaching in which large numbers of animals are killed indiscriminately in any way possible.

Although there certainly was a time of overhunting by white hunters, the hunting industry has evolved and adapted alongside man's progressing social conscience. Modern safari hunters have little impact on Africa's overall wildlife populations. Today's 21st century hunters – specifically paying clients, outfitters and professional hunters – play a major role in conservation and are responsible for the current proliferation of wildlife on private land in Southern Africa. Elsewhere in Africa, the hunting industry is fighting in the frontline trenches against commercial-scale poaching.

Unfortunately, illegal, uncontrolled and unethical poaching is rife across Africa. In North Africa the few remaining antelopes also now face a new scourge: motorized hunting with modern firearms, not only by locals but also by groups of wealthy and well-connected Arabs from the Arabian countries. In much of West, Central and East Africa, the bushmeat trade is devastating wildlife.

Poaching, whether for ivory, rhino horn, skins or meat, is the exact opposite of modern safari hunting. The irony is that animal rights groups do not distinguish between safari hunting and poaching, and are scolding legitimate hunters as murderers and immoral scumbags who are responsible for the demise of the continent's wildlife. Yet one seldom hears them raising their voices about poaching, corruption, and the mismanagement of wildlife resources throughout Africa.

Safari hunting has come a long way since the days of Roosevelt and the white hunters of British East Africa. It's also very different from the hunting expeditions undertaken by the early white pioneers and explorers.

Since then, our African hunting heritage has evolved into an important management tool for conservationists that we are proud of. Modern professional hunters, safari clients, and outfitters and their staff are *all* stewards of our wildlife and our hunting heritage. This is also a huge responsibility: We have a proud heritage to cherish, nurture and protect for the benefit of generations to follow.

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