

The “Cow and the Plow” versus Wildlife conservation in Africa.

Although living in Canada, I was born and raised in Africa and have travelled extensively all over that continent. Africa is very much part of who I am and I go back frequently, almost exclusively to the “wild places” that I find so good for my soul. The continent is blessed with the greatest abundance of exotic animal and bird life on the planet and also a much overlooked and spectacular coastline. Over the years I have witnessed with dismay the deteriorating situations with regard to Africa’s unique wildlife and am concerned about the future. The coastal areas are also of concern to me but are a different topic.

I have been following through computer contacts over a period of time, a cross section of theories and discussions concerning the complexities surrounding the future sustainability of wildlife on the African continent- something extremely close to my heart. As has been put out there in one of these discussions the subject crisply identified as “The “Cow and the Plow” in the context of wildlife conservation, the writer opines on what is happening at this time which is the conflict between the needs of people versus the needs of wildlife. Both are competing for space and resources. That writer’s thoughts are not only applicable in the African context but are applicable universally. Reading the various theories and potential solutions being discussed by that writer and by others, has spurred me to summarise where these discussions seem to be heading and putting some of my own thoughts on paper as well.

A concerned person such as me, can clearly see the need to prioritise something as basic as food production for hungry indigenous people over other esoteric needs as hunger is a far more pressing circumstance than all of the others -but the others matter too. For many westerners, climate change and the damage that mankind has done to this planet are of more urgent importance. I think these realities are all related and as a result the thoughts I am putting out connect with one another. For me wildlife conservation is the most pressing factor at this time, and there is a “clock ticking.”

The crux of the success or otherwise in the discussions I have followed have one common factor that starts with balancing the basic needs for food for survival on the part of human beings, with the same needs on the part of wild animals. Growing food requires space, that is, land. In the beginning of human history land was a seemingly unending wilderness for hunter gatherers to roam and forage. Then people evolved and static communities became established for farming and animal husbandry. Gradually chunks of the wilderness became tamed for the use of human beings. Wildlife needs space too. The ungulates to feed and follow the rains and the larger animals such as elephants to move from region to region to allow food to regenerate in their wake. We are now at the point where such movement is severely restricted by towns, highways and international borders and static herds of elephants in the established game parks are destroying their habitat at an alarming rate. “Habitat loss” as happened totally in the Tsavo National park and was dramatically documented in Peter Beard’s book “The End of the Game” posts a dire warning of things to come.

The management principle for crops and livestock has to apply to wildlife that have been trapped in the static reality that are game reserves and unfortunately the modern city dwelling westerner has no stomach for the necessity of game culling. Any rancher will know the basic rule that his livestock’s numbers are dependent on food supply. Its called sustainability. The same rule applies to wildlife.

Given that we human beings have successfully evolved to be the “uber species” on the planet the decisions on how the competition for natural resources and how to best utilise the rapidly diminishing

available land, now rests with us. If some of us value our wildlife there are some difficult decisions to be made. At the end of the day one has to recognise that people's lives matter more than wildlife and that sometimes there is a conflict between these two sets of needs. On this overcrowded planet the decisions of where, when and how to achieve a compromise is becoming critical. Nowhere is this confrontation more evident than on the African continent where human populations are increasing dramatically.

Searching for a frame of reference I think that often one's best resource is history. The saying that "Man does not live on bread alone" is reinforced by history. When humans formed more or less permanent communities and evolved into pastoralists and the herding and domestication of hitherto wild animals became the norm it is evident that the former wandering hunter gatherers had now successfully got control of their food supply. Out of this a host of other needs materialized to create civilizations. Life evolved with having to factor- in things like governance, religion, security as in protection of resources from enemies and predators, refining farming and animal husbandry etc. Unfortunately, hand in hand with this evolution came some undesirable human traits as well -such things as corruption and entitlement –" freedom" morphing into self interest greed and ego. For humans the dependence on wildlife for food flipped from that former wildlife being a need as a food source to becoming a threat to that same food source, a liability and a nuisance. Hunting societies still existed but became the exception not the rule. The hunters had become farmers and herders.

The hunting imperative was and still is etched into the DNA of some societies and individuals, and the value of wildlife still exists. Mercifully that value also exists, even if this value is a somewhat esoteric one, for many who are not hunters.

"Cultures" differ throughout this vast continent and there are some enormous diversities. Ancient Egypt -one of the identifiable earliest recorded civilizations, is part of Africa and their ancient culture is well documented. This culture was dependent on the bounty of the Nile river for the irrigation of crops and all significant evolution was in proximity to this natural feature, the longest river in the world. They placed value on the wildlife of the region as well. Animal and bird life was very much a part of their religious life as witnessed by their artifacts.

Africa's unique wildlife is unquestionably in competition with the emerging and changing cultural patterns of indigenous African people that could well destroy it. Countries south of Egypt beginning with the Sahel, in a general sense have fleeting similarities with each other but usually have (had ?) the common element of a rich and diverse population of wild animals, regrettably in places severely depleted. This is true further southwards down the continent through "Big Game Country" (if you will,) to terminate in South Africa. Throughout this region, cattle are valued as a currency. A man's wealth still is judged by this fact. Here is where the conflict starts.

The traditional ways of life for the peoples in most of these regions of Africa are similar to the early medieval world as we westerners understand our history. An example. Britain, rich in arable land and where my roots are, was subject to waves of Nordic peoples, a period known as the Viking Era. Warrior people searching for arable land to farm and raise livestock.

When things eventually settled down after the Norman conquest, hunting was the sole prerogative of the ruling classes because the "Cow and the Plow" had effectively had its way over the centuries and the depleted wildlife left was for the sport hunting of the elites. Think of "The King's Royal Deer".

Many African societies are now governed this way. In recent history the elite being the wave of the new European invaders/settlers.

Africa generated its own elites as well. One comparative example to the European medieval period would be the rise of the Zulu Kingdom in Southern Africa under Chaka in the early 1800's. This was the classic example of an all-powerful king or chief at the top, and then a hierarchy of councillors and advisors, his witchdoctors, generals, warriors and the people.

The Zulu Nation were a warrior nation forged by the strength and will of this one extraordinary and ruthless individual. The people lived in villages, sometimes extremely large villages governed by sub-chieftains. Their wealth was their cattle, the famous Nguni cattle and they had basic forms of agriculture in the areas surrounding these villages – the “Cow and the Plow” approach to sustainable living in permanent communities illustrated once again. One seldom hears too much about their hunting at that time but there unquestionably must have been hunting in some form. By today's standards there was a plethora of game of all sizes based on descriptions as related by the early European explorers and hunters. As an aside, these European explorers hardly set a good example with their hunting ethics.

As cattle were regarded as wealth in Zulu societies, wildlife would have taken a secondary role and at times be regarded as a nuisance, particularly the predators that preyed on their cattle and the ungulates that destroyed their crops. I am speculating but as everywhere in Africa, some bushmeat would have been part of peoples diet and larger game, possibly, would have been one of the more rare and exotic sources of protein. Conservation starts in the soil and what grows out of it to sustain life and it appears that in Zulu society there was a balance. Back then, importantly, there was room for this balance.

About hunting in Zululand. There is an account by a European missionary of one enormous three day hunt organized in honour of Chaka. This event employing fire and an army of warriors hunting everything and anything that was encountered – from elephants down to rabbits. Conservation or ethics on that hunt at any rate, as we understand the term, was not something given the remotest consideration. One gathers that many of the elephants killed actually died in the fire, as did some of the hunters. I use this Zulu hunt as an extreme example of the way in which I see wildlife being regarded in Africa by the indigenous people. Cattle, their wealth, were all-important.

With the advent of explorers, initially Arab, later European, ivory became a commodity. To outsiders wealth traditionally was measured in riches – value was given to ivory together with gold, silver, pearls diamonds, peacock feathers, and later, rhino horn. In more recent history there was a coterie of dedicated ivory hunters but one does not hear too much about them -only those the later European colonialists blanketly labeled as poachers motivated by the commercialization of their craft. That commercialization soon took the form of hunting for marketable products such as bushmeat, ivory, Rhino horn, or animal parts -tradeable or saleable commodities that had value. Ivory and Rhino horn in particular.

In East Africa the Wakamba tribe were famous for their elephant hunting prowess. They had an elite cadre of “professional hunters”. These individuals had traditionally and for generations utilised super-powerful bows and hunted elephant for the ivory which they sold or bartered for “stuff” that they needed. The Maasai hunted the lions that killed and ate their cattle but not generally other animals. Certainly not a case of hunting for meat. For sustenance the Maasai thrived on drinking a mixture of

blood and milk from their cattle, animals which they revered. They had a ritual for their young men when they came of age which was to spear cattle killing lions -a rite of passage into manhood.

Later in the so called Colonial era there was a group of dedicated indigenous hunters called “Magochas” who hunted elephants on contract for the government with government issued .404’s, cheap BSA, Westley Richards and Vickers rifles. The tales told about them were that they were superlative hunters. There are others as well such as the ultimate subsistence hunter trackers that were the San/Koi Bushmen in the Kalahari regions. They were the exception in that they revered the wildlife that they hunted in the arid regions of Southern Africa into which they had been pushed by Bantu tribes migrating from the North and European expansion from the South. For them farming and animal husbandry never existed. The phenomenon of “cow and the plow” was never a factor for them, but everything for the expanding waves of land hungry pastoralist/herders.

In Africa, human life was often short due to disease, starvation and sometimes, warfare. As a result parents espoused large families knowing that these factors might come into play. Children were necessary as work units, herders, field workers, water carriers and general factotums. Also to look after their parents in their old age. If the population grew to unsustainable levels they could generally gather their flocks of domestic animals, and move on -Africa was vast. This movement as I see it, left swaths of “damaged” land in its wake. Think of the Sahara desert. Researchers have found evidence of lush grasslands and the skeletal remains of a variety of wild animals in this region. People moved on -desert remained. Deserts that have yet to recover. Much of the land cleared by the indigenous peoples of Africa, the farmers/herders of that time period was, and still is, cleared by the “slash and burn” method and then overgrazed. This method is extremely damaging to the soil of any region and if continued for any length of time will leave a desert behind its path. “Contour plowing” was not a known factor. The simple and easiest method of plowing or planting was straight up and down the slope of the land. This led to severe soil erosion.

Then the Europeans arrived. The history of the world is the history of movement and the establishment of empires. These were people with a more advanced technology looking for opportunities and exploitation of hitherto undeveloped resources. Not only were they looking for resources above the surface of the African soil, arable land, but the riches in the form of mineral wealth underneath. With their advanced technology and weaponry these new arrivals soon dominated the indigenous peoples.

Consumption now included things other than only hunting for ivory or utilizing the available land for agriculture and ranching, but exploiting other resources such as mineral wealth and fossil fuel deposits -sometimes with disastrous results both for the people and for the ecology of whole regions – and as time passed -the planet. Witness the example of the devastation in the delta and surrounding areas of the Niger river in Nigeria -the liquid gold being oil.

An aside. Not only Africa, but living in Canada I am most conscious of the frightening damage to the environment through oil spillage, pollution of rivers through the waste materials of the logging industry and mining. An example “Acid rain” -sulfur dioxide from giant smelting furnaces as exemplified by the nickel mining operations around Sudbury Ontario- generated fallout that killed the fish and plant life in many of our lakes over an area of thousands of square miles. Thankfully this problem ended up being dealt with successfully -at great cost. I will not even get into the debates about mankind’s “Carbon Footprint.” In the fossil fuel rich areas of Western Canada, oil and gas pipelines interfering with the migration of the caribou herds a magnificent and iconic species -and that is only one example.

No subject of any importance can be discussed without bringing politics into the conversation. I have found this to be a fact. Life is about politics.

So, back to Africa. The colonial era changed the norms and ideas of governance in Africa. An attempt was made to eliminate inter-tribal warfare. European advanced technology, which included medical and veterinarian aid to combat diseases endemic to Africa, succeeded. Food aid and transportation equipment assured food movement, to where needed, was established. These new factors eliminated the natural population controls which had hitherto been in place. Some of the indigenous populations hitherto reliant on the "cow and the plough" approach were now introduced and incorporated into the industrialised world and the traditional patterns of life started to erode to be replaced with something totally new and in many cases not understandable -or palatable. Nevertheless the indigenous populations started to explode and continue to do so. In my opinion this population explosion in Africa, if it continues, is going to be a total disaster for the wild things in Africa -and conceivably for the continent itself. Just too many people.

The different intrinsic value for wildlife that Europeans could afford, but which placed on so many indigenous people restrictions on aspects of their traditional life and freedoms that they were used to, galled. Restrictions such as freedom of movement, the establishment of game parks, boundaries and hunting regulations contradicted their traditional culture. This was something the native peoples had never experienced, causing resentment. Who are you to tell us we must adapt? What was more important, wild animals or people? were the questions often asked. Over time that resentment inevitably morphed into a desire to run their "own show."

With the demise of colonialism in Africa which occurred after the end of the Second World War, self government became a reality. Many of the restrictions that the colonial powers had put on the emergent black nations which had become anathema - were eliminated. Wildlife conservation was often one of the casualties.

My opinion is that the concept of "wildlife conservation" as seen by the white man and not the black, was that this was a system seen to only further either the "sporting" imperatives or esoteric curiosities of a chosen few who happened to be white. This was also generally to the exclusion of the blacks – the original inhabitants of the land. Unquestionably some blacks shared the same hunting imperative- only to a greater degree of aptitude in most cases. They were left with few options – one of which was to "poach" at one or at many levels.

I remember some years ago seeing on BBC TV and hearing the statement of a Kenyan politician, name forgotten, who was part of a delegation visiting the U.K. On being interviewed about the wildlife situation in Kenya he stated bluntly. "I have just travelled by train from Scotland to London. I saw cleared land, lush fields of crops, cattle and sheep. I did not see any lions or elephants. Who are you to dare tell us how to manage our wildlife?" I believe this statement to be the point of view of many African politicians.

The question is what to do to correct the present situation? Frankly -I don't know -but as with many concerned individuals -I have similar ideas.

"If it pays it stays" is the clarion call of many wildlife conservationists. Like it or not this is a reality. The question then is- who does it pay? The safari operators or the local population? The Zimbabwean

“CAMPFIRE” (Communal Area Management Programme For Indigenous Species) model geared to partnering – “partnering” being the key word - safari operators with the indigenous peoples seems to give these communities an understanding of the benefits of sustainable consumptive (hunting) and non-consumptive (photographical tourism) both utilizing wildlife as a resource. The hunting approach having an additional benefit -food in the form of protein. The obvious benefit of the sustainable, managed hunting approach is the negligible effect on the wildlife population, the utilization of the skills of the local population as trackers and skinners and the benefits in terms of protein in the form of meat distribution which to a degree eliminates the need for the poaching of bushmeat -something the non-consumptive industry does not offer.

In 2018 I successfully hunted tuskless elephant in the Dande South designated safari area of Zimbabwe on the border with Mozambique. The incidence of tusklessness of this iconic species is of concern to the game departments for a variety of reasons and this hunt is basically a selective cull. The safari camp was located near the village of Masoka and the staff from the camp manager (a qualified professional hunter) down were all from this village as were our two top notch trackers. The safari operator and the village community are part of the CAMPFIRE programme. Everything was first rate. I have just heard that two of the young men from that village have successfully completed their medical training -this was partly due to funds received through this programme. In addition, every scrap of meat from the elephant went into the cooking pots of the villagers. This is an example of a model that not only works but works well.

On this hunt, as on several previous hunts, I was eaten alive by tsetse flies. We can thank this voracious bloodsucking insect for many of the vast, pockets of naturally occurring wildlife. Simply, people and domesticated animals just cannot survive in proximity to the tsetse – the humans die of sleeping sickness and their cattle and domestic animals of “Ngama” the dreaded cattle killer. Wildlife in these areas are impervious to their toxic bites. The tsetse fly is nature’s champion conservationist and the gain, as far as I am concerned, is worth the pain.

As on previous CAMPFIRE partnered hunts the above experience bucks the norm. Yes, the privileged, generally white, professional hunter and his client are fulfilling a natural imperative to hunt, but there is a substantial benefit to the local villagers as well – I like to think that they see the wildlife as “their wildlife.” For once the hunting safari was not to be to the sole benefit of the white elite.

I have read about a proposal that in certain areas based on sustainable game counts, a quota of animals could be reserved for the managed hunting by qualified indigenous/ local hunters only. The high licence fees being eliminated. I see this as a sensible approach to resolving many of the negative questions to do with white privilege. Having hunters in the field has been proven to be the best deterrent to poaching. As long as the hunter has a stake in the conservation of the quarry does it matter whether the hunter is white or black? Is this perhaps not an equitable solution ?

In Botswana, a premier hunting destination, the local population, citizen hunters, have the right to hunt. I am not sure about the details and would be fascinated to hear how well this system works. Simply put, I do not know. I ask these question because as a white person, I totally understand the desire and need of a black who has the same hunting imperative etched into his/her DNA as I do.

A word about poaching and that iconic African animal the elephant and that interesting prehistoric relic the rhino. With the surge in human populations on the planet the seemingly insatiable Asian demand ,

do the math, for poached ivory and rhino horn have at some point to exceed the supply which will mean the end of these two magnificent animals. Apart from prehistoric mammoth ivory, the greatest, almost only, source of that supply is the African continent. The largest country of demand-China. All over the world there is an outcry about poached ivory. An understandable gut reaction to the documented evidence of slaughtered elephants rotting in the bush with the ivory, big or small, hacked out of their faces. In protein starved Africa, thousands of tons of meat left rotting in the bush. What a waste.

Research has shown that it's the huge international, mainly Asian, cartels that make the money off wildlife. Totally ignoring the fact that they are "killing the goose that laid the golden egg". The locals, earn a pittance. The cartels operate right under the very noses of the officialdom meant to eliminate them. The spectre of endemic corruption at government level is all too apparent. Out in the bush though, one has to ask the question - if someone is starving and is offered a few dollars to poach is there not a huge temptation to do just that? Especially if there is no alternative.?

In this regard, some of the various conservation organizations, and all of the animal rights organizations are swift to condemn and blame both the hunting fraternity and the indigenous people for their lack of stewardship of wildlife.. They conflate poaching with legitimate hunting and do not seem to understand the difference between conservation and preservation. Game management organizations have a few real experts and there are also many armchair know -it- alls out there. Mainly connected with the media. Most of the latter group live in large cities -usually large cities located elsewhere than Africa.

At no stage in the past, it seems, was the ivory trade ever efficiently regulated. The words "Regulated" "Ivory" "Rhino horn" and "Trade" are four dirty words for most people when put together. I disagree. The dirty word is "Corruption."

Internationally, attempts have been made to initiate a properly regulated trade in ivory and rhino horn amongst other animal products. It would seem that the animal rights organizations have done their best to sabotage these efforts which is a sad commentary on a total lack of understanding of the good that should result.

One need look no further than the "Abolition Years" in North America to see what happens when any product is made illegal. The criminals move in and havoc ensues. I, for one, cry when I see the images of towers of ivory going up in flame in Kenya -a publicity stunt at best to appease a few self righteous so called animal rights groups. That abomination shows the destruction of millions of dollars of ivory, much of which was picked up in the bush by game rangers from dead elephants -usually dead by natural causes. As I see it, this just drives up the prices of ivory because of a diminished supply. And yes, elephants do die of natural causes -usually old age and starvation.

The Africa that I grew up in was, and still is, comprised mainly of rural populations with a huge dependency on the land. Can this be changed to a more "balanced" society ? To realize a balanced society I believe that an incentive has to be offered to get more people directed to a livelihood in something other than scrub or subsistence farming. One thoughtful theory put forward by two ex-safari operators who lived in Africa that has a bearing on this conversation has merit. This was a posed as a question as to why most of Africa's mineral resources have to be exported to be turned into marketable items? It is a fact that Africa has unbelievable mineral wealth . Many mining operations are owned and run by international companies with the locals relegated to the role of junior partners at best. The raw mineral wealth is then shipped elsewhere for producing a marketable end product. Could

that product not be produced in Africa ? Or at least some of it? There are a multitude of uses for metals such as copper, as one example. There are other avenues to be explored. What about the waste products of the petroleum industry that can be turned into wax? Raw wax is the basic ingredient of a multitude of products.

There must be many, but these are but two suggestions to take the dependency of the local people away from the fast disappearing agricultural land. Some creative thinking might come up with many more. With even subsistence farming becoming a limited means of livelihood one sees streams of people coming into the city from the rural areas searching for a better life only to end up with no job opportunity and next to nothing to live on. Sometimes they resort to crime. Without government plans to organise these people as a positive resource this exodus off the land is doomed to failure. Damned if you stay on the land, damned if you don't. Smart phones, the internet and television make people aware that an alternative lifestyle exists. People cannot be blamed for looking for a better life.

The above gives rise to the question of people management, government and something we call politics. The hurdles faced are to overcome such things as traditions, conflicting political objectives, corruption (as stated, a huge problem), exploitation, lack of training/education, management, trade unions, and the list goes on. I believe, however, that any potentially workable plan that can entice some people off dependence on the land, is worth a try. Maybe people, themselves, as a resource ?

The currently escalating population explosion In Africa, is a disaster in the making. With so many land-dependent people the present situation is simply not sustainable. Ultimately what things boil down to are the control of the dependency on the land/resources and control of the burgeoning population. If these two things are not addressed Africa's wildlife habitat will disappear and this might just end up as being one of many of this planets irreplaceable casualties. We will all be the losers.

There is another factor which cannot be ignored. Africa is a relatively poor continent extremely rich in mineral resources. These resources are of extraordinary value to developed and developing countries elsewhere on the planet. China is one such example. I believe that China, heavily invested in Africa, has no vested interest in anything other than taking what it needs for its own furtherment. This is a topic on its own but I believe that there is no altruism that I can see in this involvement.

I do not want to sound too apocalyptic but our current dealing with our natural environment, has dire consequences, not only for ourselves as a species, but for the conservation of wildlife. There are many problems not yet solved and we are the authors of many of these problems. The solutions have to do with a potpourri of factors that are interrelated. It is not going to be easy and major adjustments and sacrifices will have to be made.

History has shown that when a civilization become successful it can become too successful. That very success leads to fast growing populations either through birth and/or attracting immigration to share in that success. The evidence is there that the inevitable result is that civilization's collapse as it exhausts its resources and become unsustainable. Fast forward to the present - a direct consequence is that parts of the natural environment are being irretrievably damaged worldwide. Already, species are becoming extinct in our lifetime. If we are not careful we could lose so much that is wonderful on this planet. We must keep trying to achieve solutions that are better than what currently exist. Solutions? I do not have them but these are things I think of constantly, the reason I am writing this down.

Meanwhile the clock is ticking.

In the end, the peoples of the continent of my birth and a place that I love will have to solve the many problems of its destiny themselves. So far I have I have not seen more than glimmerings of light as to where this will end up. Help is needed -a lot of it. I can only hope that if better minds than mine also care and commit themselves a home-grown solution for this African dilemma will result.

At this time I am not holding my breath.

Tony Marsh. Toronto, Canada, April/May 2021