

## Conservation, Communities and Colonials: The History of Natural Resource Management in Southern Africa

*“But these are God’s animals. How can this King George who wears a funny hat come and tell us that the animals are his? We couldn’t understand it. Many of us were angry and many of us used to cross the fences, invade the game reserves and kill animals in spite of this alien King George. People were forced to raid the game reserves out of sheer survival”.* Credo Mutwa, Zulu spokesperson

For thousands of years Africa’s rural people have depended on natural resources for their livelihood. They have managed their flora and fauna sustainably so that their children could survive. In southern Africa —

- **Hunter-gatherers** lived in small groups and generally did not degrade their environment. In Botswana and Zimbabwe, archaeological evidence suggests that the San used their environment to provide food, firewood and raw materials for weapons.
- **Early pastoralists** such as the Khoi-Khoi took up livestock herding, moving their herds about the countryside with them as they continued to rely on natural resources for their subsistence.
- **Shifting cultivators** took advantage of arable lands for mixed farming, using woodlands and savannahs for different cultivations and thus adapting their farming systems to changing environmental conditions.

### Traditional management systems

Different tribal groups developed cultural beliefs and taboos to ensure natural resources were used sustainably. Although colonial governments outlawed some these traditional practices, many of them continue today.

#### *Trees and woodlands*

- In Zimbabwe a number of beliefs and taboos acted as a forestry code ensuring that rural communities did not destroy their woodlands. It was generally believed breaking these rules led to disasters such as drought, famine or disease. For example, only dry wood was used for firewood and large trees and fruit trees were allowed to remain in fields to provide fruit, shade and fodder.
- Many groups designated ‘sacred groves’ - small patches of forest reserved for worshipping spiritual ancestors.

#### *Soil and water*

- Many communities practised intercropping, mixing various plants together such as grains, beans, pumpkins and root crops. This mixture reduced the risk of planting a single crop that might fail due to adverse weather conditions. In some cases it also led to increased water and soil conservation as well as the suppression of weeds and pests.
- In the highlands of Zimbabwe and Tanzania, farmers traditionally terraced the steep slopes reducing soil erosion.
- The Bemba people of Zambia used to burn the fields that they cultivate on a rotation basis. The burning rid the soil of pests and the ash acted as a fertiliser.

#### *Wildlife*

Most African rural communities had customary laws that banned indiscriminate hunting, restricting hunting to certain seasons and species. There were widespread cultural taboos in hunting certain species such as hyenas and monkeys as well as the young of all species. Some groups prohibited the killing of totem animals - species that hold spiritual meaning or are thought to be ancestors. In the 1960's an anthropologist reported that the Bisa people of Zambia only allowed members of a hunting guild to hunt rarer species such as elephant, hippo and aardvark, whilst non-guild members could kill more common animals such as impala and warthog.

#### *Traditional hunting : the Chilla in Zambia*

*Every few years the Ila-speaking people of Zambia traditionally held communal expeditions known as the 'chilla' to hunt lechwe (a medium size antelope) in the Kafue flats. These hunts could only be authorised by chiefs and elders who would first check that the animal populations were sufficiently large enough. Only bows, spears and arrows were used and female and immature lechwe were overlooked in the hunt in order to maintain populations. Colonial governments banned the chilla in the name of conservation whilst sanctioning the more destructive rifle hunts of Europeans.*

## Impact of Colonialism

Each colonial rule had many effects on the African environment. Perhaps the most significant measure was the widescale compression of African populations to marginal lands considered unsuitable for European farming. This was imposed all over southern Africa. Other conservation policies were inimical to African conditions often making the situation worse.

### *Trees and woodlands*

- Colonial government reforestation programmes used quick-growing exotic species such as eucalyptus, which is valued for its resistance to termites. However, local farmers complained that eucalyptus uses an inordinate amount of water, which could be used for fields or grasslands. It burns poorly and cannot be used for fodder.
- Poorly designed commercial timber plantations often resulted in the drying up of fertile farmed valleys and wetlands. This still happens as recently reported from Kwazulu, South Africa.

### *Soil and water*

Recognising the importance of soil conservation, particularly in arid areas, colonial authorities called for strict penalties (such as gaol) for those who did not partake in its soil conservation measures —

- Most colonial governments prohibited the traditional cultivation in wetlands, assuming that farming in these areas could degrade the watershed. However, a 1984 report by the British Overseas Development Administration noted that these wetlands had been sustainably used for hundreds of years. The report recommended that credit should be provided to allow local farmers to cultivate wetlands again to increase household food security in times of drought.
- In Lesotho a massive soil-contouring scheme was poorly designed and implemented with the result that the contours contributed to widespread soil erosion in the country.

### *Wildlife conservation*

Whilst colonials prohibited locals from subsistence hunting, they rapidly decimated southern Africa's game herds (see below). European settlers in the Cape were responsible for the first known African mammal extinctions - the blaubok (a large antelope) and the quagga (a zebra) both of which were extinct by 1860. *The Times* of London noted in 1900 that in the Cape Colony "the big game have almost wholly ceased to exist".

#### *Decimating game : the excesses of the colonial hunters*

*There are numerous accounts of the excessive hunting that the colonials indulged in. In 'Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa' published in 1850, Roualeyn Cumming lamented the decline of game in the Cape Colony, although ironically he claimed to have shot hundreds of elephant, rhino, wildebeest, impala and other animals himself. In southern Africa it was common to shoot 90 elephant in one trip and records show that some hunters could easily double this amount. For example in 1867, Jan Viljoen shot 210 elephant during a single safari. Another famous hunter, Frederick Selous, killed 548 animals between 1877 - 1880. Early European hunters did not use the codes of sportsmanship that exist today - they fired blindly, killed females and their young, set traps at waterholes and did not pursue wounded animals. By about 1900 the Cape, Natal, Orange Free State and the South Africa Republic had lost practically their entire wildlife heritage due to excessive hunting.*

To address this, the first protected areas were set aside by colonial governments in the late 19th century. Local residents were prohibited from using their natural resources on which they depended for their livelihood and many were moved away from their traditional homelands, which had become protected areas. Hampered by lack of resources, staff and local support, national parks struggled to achieve their conservation aims and many did not succeed until after independence.

## Post-Independence: an integrated approach

Countries in southern Africa have only recently become independent but several trends point to successful management of natural resources management policies in the region —

- legally allowing residents to harvest their natural resources. In Zimbabwe massive increases in wildlife under private control as farmers began to farm wildlife for game hunting, live sales, meat or other animal products.
- empowering community management of natural resources. Projects are springing up all over southern Africa and forestry, grasslands and wildlife have been successfully managed by local communities who use profits for rural development and environmental conservation.