

Looking back in South Africa

One reads many accounts of South Africa teeming with large herds of many species of gamewith. herds being reported to be so big that they took 5 days to pass by an ox wagon camp. The most recent migration of springbok (and the last) through Beaufort West was so large, and the antelope so numerous, that they flattened gardens, fences and whatever else was in their path. Likewise, there were accounts of lion, leopard and buffalo where Cape Town currently is, and no doubt one could easily find accounts and records of all sorts of game in areas which are now covered by tarmac and buildings. The wildlife population took a tremendous pounding with the arrival of colonists and the “urbanisation” of the Southern African Continent. If one looks at this annihilation of game one can probably safely say that it was a result of killing by bullet in most cases – and historically, hunters have been blamed for this. Is this justifiable, or are there perhaps other undercurrents that led to the destruction of the wildlife population in Southern Africa?

Wildlife in the past was seen as an obstacle to settlement by agriculturalists (predators, large herbivores, etc) and was exterminated whenever there was conflict as this had a direct impact on the sustainability of the farming and agricultural activities being propagated at those times. Once agriculture was established, urbanisation followed which led to a direct destruction of the habitat needed to sustain the wildlife and the agricultural activities which had pushed it further away from “civilization”. Once the urbanisation process started agriculture was pushed further away and thus the continual invasion of wildlife habitat progressed.

So long as wildlife stood in the way of survival of man, and the ability of man to carve out a better (more financially rewarding and stable) way of life, it would be persecuted. This destruction continued at such a rate that even in those days, the disappearance of species, habitat and much of what Africa had become famous for was noted and forced people to sit up and pay attention. The establishment of the Kruger National Park was the start of awarding some sort of guaranteed habitat to wildlife (even this is now under threat from land claim). Agriculture – both agronomy and stock farming all but destroyed the wilds of South Africa, and by the turn of the 1800s to the 1900s, wildlife was under extreme threat. Wildlife essentially flourished only in the “specially proclaimed” national parks, while in the rest of the habitat it once occupied, cattle and sheep, not endemic to this region, flourished and destroyed the very land that was meant to provide the food for a growing nation. Wildlife was essentially destroyed by man’s ambition for more money and self sustainability through shooting, poisoning, fencing off and ultimately destruction of habitat. Wildlife was now in direct competition with domestic stock of the African farmer, and so long as domestic animals paid more than game it had no chance.

In the middle to latter third of the last century, a shift happened where traditional 'invitation hunts' which were free and provided sport, venison and a control of the wildlife "pests," were slowly being replaced by people who could not obtain 'nvtations' to hunt, but were prepared to pay for the privilege of hunting. Slowly but surely game and wildlife became a valuable asset, and was not seen as the pest it usually was. Eventually the time came when game became more valuable than domestic animals because of the demand by hunters, eco-tourism and breeding institutions on the available "free ranging" game. At this stage, farmers started fencing their properties so as to contain their game, and this was the birth of the 'game farming' industry in South Africa.

The effect on game in South Africa

The exploding demand on wildlife by local and foreign hunters, and its financial worth, led to numerous farmers converting from stock farming to game farming. This has resulted in incredibly encouraging statistics, and which make numerous foreign countries envious of the success of ensuring the on-going habitat and availability of wildlife and the various species in South Africa. This success has, dare I say, almost been by 'accident', as in my mind, it was not a true "let's conserve our wildlife" drive that led to this success, but rather a quest for a better living financially by farmers struggling under droughts, tick burdens and tropical and subtropical diseases of their stock. The predominant force behind this demand for game has been hunters who are prepared to pay (in some cases ridiculously high prices) for the privilege to hunt and the shooting of a trophy, or non trophy venison animal. Private landowners in South Africa collectively contribute habitat to wildlife which is approximately three times larger than the National and Provincial Parks combined. It has been reported that this area continues to grow at roughly 500000 ha. per annum. It has been estimated that there is currently 60% more biomass of wildlife in South Africa than there was at the turn of the last century, and as stated above, most of this increase is privately owned in game farms across the nation.

Conservation of Wildlife in South Africa

It has long been reported that unless wildlife in Africa has any meaning to communities (that is financial worth, and a method of upliftment of living standard), it is doomed. Reports by some authorities of conservation have gone so far as to say that the very areas set aside for “preservation” of wildlife are under severe threat because of the people fighting for animal rights and refusing to accept the policy of sustainable utilization of wildlife as a conservation tool. Of all the forms of income derived from wildlife, hunting is the one which provides the biggest income for the smallest human “footprint” left behind. Eco-tourism and photographic tours provide a significant source of income to farms that cater for these, but these have to be complemented by sustainable utilisation for the areas to be manageable and to ensure their future, and thus the future of wildlife on these pieces of ground. The financial worth of the wildlife currently in private hands is ensuring that it is well looked after and will continue to be so unless something leads to the farming of domestic stock being more profitable or less problematic than game farming. Once domestic stock farming is more lucrative than game farming, I am afraid the pendulum will swing the other way again, and a dramatic wipe out of the currently healthy populations of South African wildlife will be seen.

Some conservation successes in South Africa:

- 1) Privately owned land devoted to wildlife roughly three times more than National and Provincial Parks.
- 2) The number of game animals on privately owned game farms is approximately twice that present in the country’s parks.
- 3) Game is roughly 60% more plentiful than at turn of 1800s to 1900s
- 4) Since the 1950s, the bontebok population has grown from as low as 19 to a healthy population of around 3500.
- 5) White rhino have increased from 28 to nearly 12000.
- 6) Cape mountain zebra have grown in number from 11 to around 1100.
- 7) Black wildebeest from a herd of 34 (on 1 privately-owned farm), to over 22000.

Hunting was established to have been one of the main driving forces behind the success and increase in numbers of the above species, and land area.

How have hunters contributed to the economy of wildlife conservation in South Africa?

In South Africa, hunting has been shown to be:

- 1) A responsible commitment to Conservation.
- 2) A major industry supporting people and creating employment.
- 3) A large development opportunity.
- 4) A tourism opportunity.

Exactly how big is the hunting industry in South Africa?

Hunting contributes in the following manner to the Wildlife / Safari / Game / Hunting financial cluster:

- 1) Firearms industry (licensing) – R150 Million.
- 2) Leisure Hunting – R3100 Million.
- 3) Trophy and Overseas Hunters – R1200 Million.
- 4) Consumables, Books and Medical – R200 Million.
- 5) Game Auctions and Private Sales – R200 Million.
- 6) Infrastructure and Vehicles – R100 Million.
- 7) Lodges and Tourism – R100 Million.
- 8) Bowhunting – R100 Million.
- 9) Birding – R100 Million.
- 10) Wing-shooting – R400 Million.
- 11) Taxidermy (export and local) – R300 Million.
- 12) Translocation – R130 Million.
- 13) Provincial Permits – R20 Million.
- 14) Investment in Game Farms – R20 000 Million.
- 15) Labour – R1600 Million.

Thus it is an industry with an annual turnover of R7700 Million, and in investment in game farms of R20 000 Million.

From this it is clear that hunting plays a significant role in conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat in Africa. History has proved this, as have current figures of game counts, game use and finance generated by hunting.

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