

Happy Birthday Selous!

# Africa's Oldest Protected Area Celebrates

## 120 Years

The Selous Game Reserve, in southern Tanzania, is not only Africa's largest protected area, but also its oldest. It celebrated its 120th birthday on May 7th. Although a portion of the reserve is used for photo-tourism, the majority of it is primarily for sustainable hunting tourism, making it Africa's largest hunting area.

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**W**hen Germany, a latecomer to European colonial expansion, declared Tanganyika a Protectorate in 1885, the slaughter of elephants had already surpassed its peak, and they were becoming rare. Two hundred tons of ivory were exported every year from Zanzibar, the equivalent of 12,000 elephants. Commercial hunters could buy licenses to shoot elephants for their ivory. In Germany, fears of the imminent extinction of the formerly rich wildlife in German East Africa became widespread after hunter-conservationists, among them Carl Georg Schillings, alerted the public in best-selling books.

However, even before then hunting regulations were already being established. The head of the German colonial administration, Reichskommissar Hermann von Wissmann, started issuing regulations in 1891, only six years after the establishment of the Protectorate. The first general Wildlife Ordinance dates back to 1896. Its intention was

made clear by von Wissmann, then Imperial Governor, in a decree: "I felt obliged to issue this ordinance in order to conserve wildlife and to prevent many species from becoming extinct, which would happen soon if present conditions prevail ... We are obliged to think also of future generations, and should secure them the opportunity to enjoy the pleasure of hunting African game in the future."

It was commercial culling and not traditional hunting by the local African population, which was considered unsustainable by the government. In their opinion, even a game-rich country like German East Africa could not conserve its wildlife in the long term if it violated "the most important principle of wildlife use, namely the sustainability of the off-take", as it was then called in a stunningly modern way.

Governor von Wissmann also decided to protect wildlife by earmarking certain areas where all hunting was to be prohibited: "I am planning to create hunting reserves in game-rich areas in order that wildlife can find





**Top:** The reserve's game scouts bear the burden of the fight against elephant poachers.

**Middle:** The former Chief Warden of the Selous, Gerald Bigurube, and the author, once project leader of Germany's Selous Conservation Program, at the Mtemere Entrance Gate in 2014, while conducting a project preparation mission.

**Right page:** Remains of a poached elephant and a young bull near the Rufiji River.

refuge there and sustain its populations. In such areas the hunting of game will only be permitted with the explicit prior permission of the Imperial Government. Their establishment should also serve science, in order to conserve such game species which have already become rare in East Africa."

In every district the local administration was required to select one or two suitable areas. The governor's office even stipulated the size, namely the area created by "ten-hour's walk in every direction". In that amount of time a person could walk about thirty kilometers. Every hunting reserve

should therefore measure approximately 1,000 square kilometers.

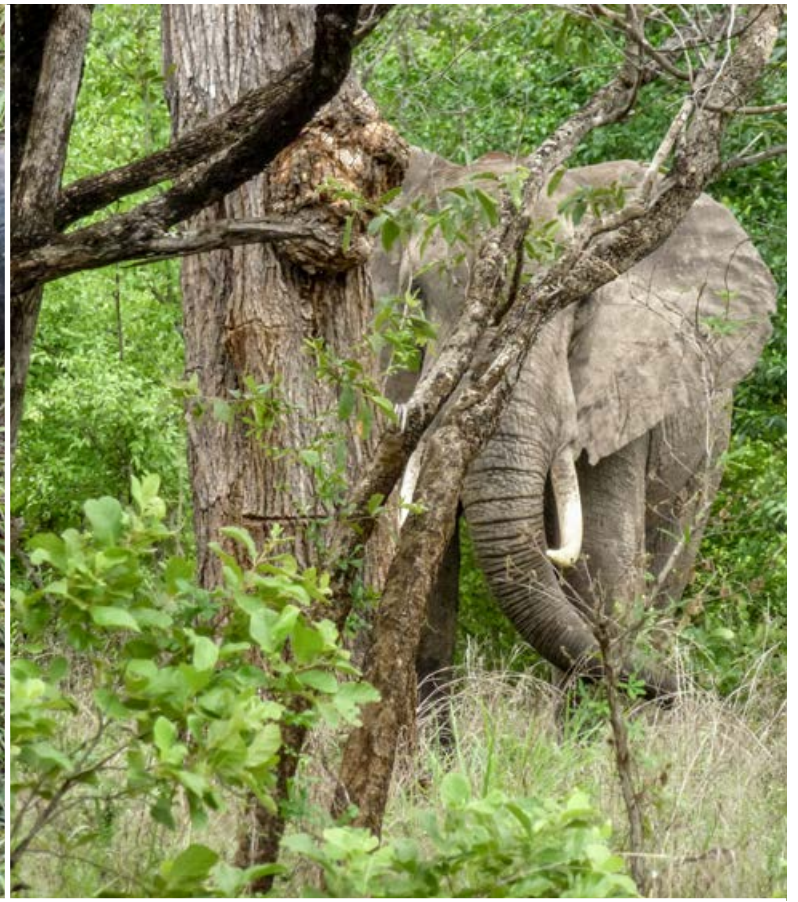
The first such protected area was established by a decree of May 7, 1896: "I declare as a 'Hunting-Reserve' the area which has as its northern boundary the country on Rubeho Beho, in the west the ascent to the Khutu-Plateau (sharply demarcated by the chain of hills extending from Kisaki in a north-southerly direction until they reach the Rufiji), in the south the Rufiji River up to Mtemere, and in the east the lakes of the steppe up to the village of Mserakera".

Different names were in use for this protected area. It was called either Rufiji, Mohoro, or Kisaki Reserve. It was well over 1,500 square kilometers in size, and located within what is nowadays known as the northern sector of the Selous. Most of the present-day tourist camps lie inside the original reserve, as created by the colonial administration. There were a number of villages within the boundaries of the Reserve, and there was no intention to displace them.

Even today local inhabitants and game scouts call the Selous 'Shamba la Bibi', which translated literally means the field of the lady. It is widely believed, and repeated in many travel guides, that the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II gave the Selous area to his wife as a birthday present. I could not find any proof of this in the colonial files or literature, and the Germans generally documented everything quite well. It seems unlikely that the Kaiser would give a small area of unknown and unimportant bush to his wife Auguste Victoria, who might have felt more insulted than honored by such a gift!

A more probable explanation for the term is found in the German files kept in the archives in Dar es Salaam. In correspondence between the Bezirksamt (District Administration) in Morogoro and the Governor's Office, dated 1912, it was pointed out that the local people did not understand the difference between a game reserve and a forest reserve. (The forest reserve was another category of protected land introduced by the Germans to conserve natural vegetation and to avoid deforestation, a problem that existed even then.) Herr Redslob, a young forester who had contact with the locals, proposed to distinguish between the two





## History and Facts About the Selous Game Reserve

1885	German East-Africa established	1988	The Tanzanian-German 'Selous Conservation Program' starts
1896	German Governor Hermann von Wissmann creates the first game reserve by decree. It is called Mohoro Reserve	1989	Elephant population is 30,000
1914	Fifteen protected areas exist (3% of the colony)	1990	Community Wildlife Management starts: surrounding villages gain hunting rights in the buffer zones around the reserve
1917	German and British troops fight in Mohoro Reserve; Frederick Selous falls at Behobeho	1992	Selous retention scheme introduced: 50% of all income is retained by reserve; 90% of all revenues are from hunting
1918	British protectorate Tanganyika is established	1998	Elephant population is 55,000
1922	Four reserves in southern Tanzania are connected and called the Selous Game Reserve	2002	Elephant population is 63,000; no poached elephants are found during that year's survey
1943 – 1948	Residents are evacuated from the Selous Game Reserve due to sleeping sickness; Game Warden C.J.P. Ionides increases the size of the reserve	2003	Selous Conservation Program comes to an end
1961	Tanzanian Independence	2002 – 2007	Selous-Niassa corridor developed
1965	The last European Warden, Brian Nicholson, introduces hunting tourism in order to finance the reserve. Three years later photo-tourism was introduced.	2006	Elephant population over 70,000; Director of Wildlife discontinues the Selous retention scheme; causing the deterioration of the reserve to begin once more; poaching increases
1974	Final piece of land added to reserve at south-bank of Rufiji River, when people are resettled during Ujaama collectivization policy; reserve size now 50,000 square kilometers	2013	Elephant population is 13,000; total market value of ivory illegally removed from the Selous is estimated at over 100 million U.S. dollars
1976	Elephant population 110,000; all game populations have greatly increased	2014 – 2016	SEEP - Selous Elephant Emergency Program (CIC, FZS, German Government)
1975 – 1985	During the period of 'African Socialism', conservation deteriorates; intensive poaching reduces game populations	2015	Elephant population is 15,000, less poaching
1986	Elephant population is 55,000; the rhino population of 3,000 drops to less than 50	2016	German Government funds new Selous project with 18 million Euros



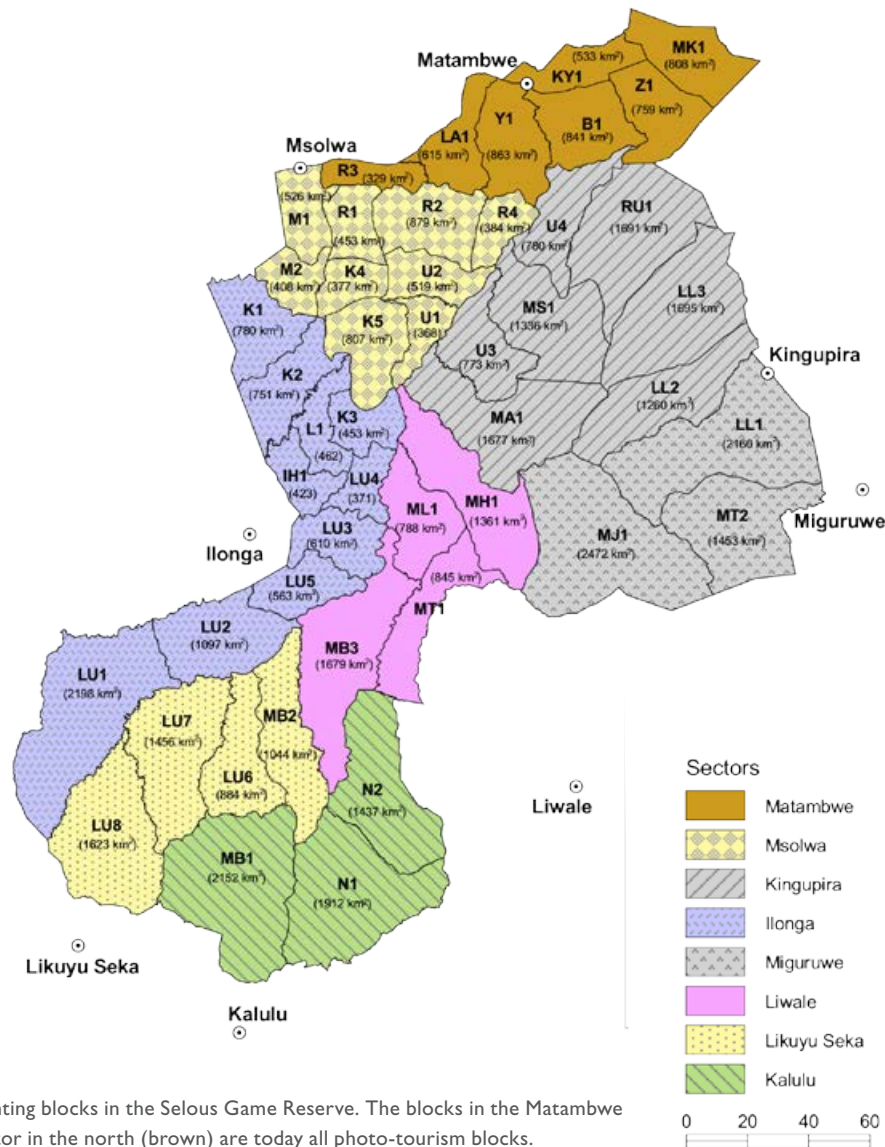


Left: Map showing the Selous Game Reserve, the Niassa National Game Reserve (Mozambique) and the connecting Selous Niassa Wildlife Corridor, which is based on community 'Wildlife Management Areas' of the villages.

Right: Protected areas in Tanzania

by simply pointing out what locals were, and were not, allowed to do in the different reserve categories. In a game reserve they were allowed to have fields (shambas), grow crops, collect firewood and cut trees – predominantly work of the womenfolk. However, hunting, an entirely male occupation in African society, was not allowed. He therefore suggested 'Shamba la Bibi' as a short and snappy phrase to explain what could be done in a game reserve and what could not – namely women's work, not men's work.

The Germans created three additional protected areas near the Rufiji reserve. They were the nucleus of what was to become the Selous, when in 1921 the then game warden of Tanganyika, C.F.M. Swynnerton, proposed to merge them. The British Colonial Government, which had taken over the colony from the Germans after World War I, indeed named the consolidated reserve the 'Selous', after the great Victorian hunter and adventurer Frederick Courteney Selous, who had been shot there by General von Lettow-Vorbeck's troops in 1917 during the East African Campaign. ■



Hunting blocks in the Selous Game Reserve. The blocks in the Matambwe sector in the north (brown) are today all photo-tourism blocks.

**i Literature**

Baldus, Rolf (Ed.)  
 Wild Heart of Africa – The Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, Rowland Ward, Johannesburg 2009

Further information:  
[www.wildlife-baldus.com/selous\\_game.html](http://www.wildlife-baldus.com/selous_game.html)