

HAPPY BIRTHDAY SELOUS!

AFRICAS OLDEST PROTECTED AREA CELEBRATES 110 YEARS

by Rolf D. Baldus

Neither Tanzania nor the world might take notice of an important anniversary taking place in 2006: Africa's oldest and largest protected area celebrates its 110th anniversary.

Ivory, Slave Traders and Explorers

The vast *miombo* forests of south-eastern Tanzania have been sparsely settled for thousands of years. Hunter-gatherers moved around living on the rich wildlife, fish, trees and wild plants.

A Portuguese explorer who made a journey from Tete to Kilwa in 1616 found very little habitation and referred to these lands as "terra deserta". The mid-nineteenth century explorers described small settlements separated by considerable stretches of uninhabited bush. Small clans and lineage groups lived an isolated life without any larger tribal structures and coherence. Whether these people dispersed to avoid the horrors of the century-old slave trade or whether the slave traders took advantage of naturally dispersed and therefore very vulnerable clans and other small groups is impossible to determine.

The Arab-driven slave trade intensified after the Omani rulers took permanent residence on Zanzibar in 1840. Slaves in their thousands were headed from the interior to the coast each year, on the way to Kilwa, which had been a major slave exporting centre since the middle ages. Another extensively used caravan and slave trade route passed through the north of present-day Selous via Beho Beho and Kisasi towards Bagamoyo, and it is reported that large caravans of a thousand men or more passed through every week when the first Europeans visited around 1857. A third caravan route ran from Mahenge along the Ulanga and Rufiji Rivers via Utete, reaching the coast at the delta of the Rufiji. Baron von der Decken travelled west along the southernmost of these routes in 1860, and noted that the country was thickly populated in places, and generally peaceful, and that slaves came from much farther up-country. However, those travelling along or north of the Rufiji like Richard Burton, Thomson and Johnston reported "the plundering of the country. The plague has now spread like a flight of locusts over the land." (Burton). When William Beardall explored the Rufiji River under the orders of the Sultan of Zanzibar, Sayyid Barghash, in December 1880, he found that Beho Beho village had been burnt the

same year by people from Mahenge, who were regularly hunting slaves for the Arabs along the Rufiji. They met little resistance. Chief Korogero had been taken prisoner at some stage and was paying a yearly tribute to the Mahenge ruler. Most villages were deserted and people were hiding in swampy retreats after the harvest.

The “Kaiser” Rules the Rufiji

The Arab slave trade and ivory hunting had gone hand-in-hand since the middle ages. African ivory became so popular and common in Europe that in an early form of globalisation the price of walrus-ivory is said to have fallen to low levels in Greenland in the 14th century. When Germany, a latecomer to European colonial expansion, declared Tanganyika a Protectorate in 1885, the slaughter of the elephants had already surpassed its peak and elephants were becoming rare. 40 tons of ivory were, however, still exported every year from Zanzibar, the equivalent of some 3,000 elephants. Commercial hunters could buy licences to shoot elephants for their ivory. The German hunter and author Schomburgk, who had travelled on foot and on bicycle all the way from South Africa, traversed the Selous area and shot several elephants along the Ruaha River. The rinderpest epidemic had swept through the protectorate in the nineties from the north, drastically reducing buffaloes and antelopes. Fears of imminent extinction of the formerly rich wildlife in German East Africa became widespread in Germany after hunter-conservationists, amongst them Carl Georg Schillings, alerted the public in bestselling books.

However, shooting restrictions had already become effective. "Reichskommissar" von Wissmann had started to issue these in 1891, when the first hunting regulations were declared in Moshi District, only six years after the establishment of the Protectorate.

The first general Wildlife Ordinance for what was then German East Africa dates back to 1896. Its intention was made clear by Hermann 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 chance to enjoy the pleasure of hunting African game in the future." Further decrees and implementing regulations were issued in 1898, 1900, 1903, 1905 and 1908 culminating in the comprehensive Wildlife Act of 1911.

The colonial Government meant business. Many a European planter who thought that the bush had no eyes and that they could violate the acts without consequences was taken to court and fined. The files of such court cases are still to be found in the National Archives in Dar Es Salaam.

European settlers and hunters were quite frustrated by their own Government, which did not interfere with traditional hunting by the local African population unless it was seen as commercial. Von Wissmann felt that the major threat to African fauna came from the Europeans, but these immigrants, including most famous hunters of the time like Selous, Schillings and Schomburgk, of course held the opposite view.

It was the commercial culling which was considered unsustainable by the Government at the time. In their opinion, even a game-rich country like German East Africa could not preserve its wildlife in the long term if it violated "the most important principle of any wildlife use, namely the sustainability of the off-take", as it was then called in a stunningly modern way. In 1911, therefore, all commercial culling was stopped and hunting was regulated. One of the last commercial ivory hunters was Scottish-born James Sutherland who had assisted the Germans in the Maji Maji war and was rewarded with hunting permits for elephants in the southern Selous area. He always fancied rather intimate relationships with the local womenfolk and later met a pitiful fate after being poisoned, presumably by a jealous husband, somewhere in central Africa.

Creating the Reserve in 1896

Governor von Wissmann also decided to protect wildlife by earmarking certain areas where all hunting was to be stopped: "I am planning to create hunting reserves in game rich areas in order that wildlife can find refuge there and sustain their populations. In such areas 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 earmark one or two suitable areas. The Governor's office even laid down the size, namely the area created by "ten hours walk in every direction". In such a time a person would walk about 30 km. Every hunting reserve should therefore measure approximately 1,000 km², which is about the size of the Saadani National Park today.

The first two such protected areas were established by a decree of May 7th, 1896: "I declare as "Hunting-Reserve" the area, which has as its northern boundary the country of Rubeho Beho, in the west the ascent to the Khutu-Plateau (sharply demarcated by the chain of hills extending from Kisasi in a north-southerly direction until they reach the Rufiji), in the south the Rufiji River up to Mtemere (Ramsay's map), in the east the lakes of the steppe up to the village of Mserakera (Kiepert's map)." Different names were in use for this protected area. It was called Rufiji, Mohoro or Kisasi Reserve. It's size was well over 1,000 km² and it lay within what is nowadays called the northern sector of the Selous. All present tourist camps except Stiegler's Gorge and Sand Rivers lie inside the original reserve as created by the colonial administration. There were a number of villages within the boundaries of the reserve, such as Beho Beho, and there was no intention to move them out.

The second protected area von Wissmann declared was Kilimanjaro-West in Moshi District. It was later degazetted. Governor von Götzen subsequently confirmed in a letter that these two areas were the first protected game reserves in the colony and that they were established in 1896. Until now the Umfolozi, Hluhluwe and Sabi (later Kruger National Park) Reserves in South Africa were regarded as Africa's oldest protected areas. But their origins date back only to 1898. The Selous is therefore Africa's oldest Park in the modern sense. Certain sacred areas where hunting was also forbidden had already existed before in traditional African society.

The creation of such a large protected area in German East Africa in 1896 is quite remarkable, as the official German nature preservation movement dates back only to the year 1906 when a nature conservation office was opened in Danzig. This office

created protected the first nature sites and monuments in Germany. Most of them were very small.

In German East Africa, however, the authorities had created 15 protected areas by 1911. They covered approximately 30,000 km² or 3% of the colony. They were called "hunting reserves", but in fact all hunting was prohibited. Any violation could be penalized with three months imprisonment or a fine of up to 5,000 rupees which was ten times the price of an elephant licence.

Shamba la Bibi

Settlement was not excluded, but the Government tried to select primarily unsettled land. The supervision of the hunting reserves was left in the hands of the local chiefs, assisted by one or two African game scouts. Two German foresters were posted at Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Meru, but the Rufiji Reserve was supervised only by locals. Informers reporting poaching activities were financially rewarded and in general poaching was said to be minimal. Outside the reserve hunting continued and agricultural development was encouraged. At the narrow gorge of the Rufiji River, which the Germans called "Pangani rapids" and which is known today as Stiegler's Gorge, a German engineer even wanted to construct a bridge and a dam. His project came to an early end, however, when the engineer, named Stiegler, was killed 1907 near the gorge by an elephant which he had wounded.

Even today local people and game scouts call the Selous "Shamba la Bibi" which when translated literally means "the field of the lady". It is widely believed and repeated in many publications, that the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II gave the Selous area to his wife Auguste Viktoria as a birthday present. I could not find any proof for this in the colonial files or literature, and generally the Germans documented everything well. It also seems unlikely that the Kaiser would give a small area of unknown and unimportant bush to his wife (who might have felt more insulted than honoured by such a gift!). A more probable explanation for the term was found a few months ago by Bernhard Gissibl, a PhD student from Berlin, in old German files kept in the archives in Dar es Salaam.

In correspondence, dated 1912, between the "Bezirksamt" (District Administration) in Morogoro and the Governor's office on the establishment of another reserve in the "Mkata-Steppe" which is north of and partly within present-day Mikumi National Park, it was pointed out that the local people did not understand the difference between a game reserve and a forest reserve. This was another category of protected land introduced by the Germans to conserve natural vegetation and to avoid deforestation, a problem even then. Special reference was made to the Rufiji Game Reserve where the same problem would exist.

Herr Redslob, a young forester ("Forstassessor") who had travelled the Mkata area at length and talked with the people, therefore proposed to distinguish between them by simply pointing out what local people were allowed and were not allowed to do in the different categories of reserves. In a game reserve they could have fields ("shamba"), grow crops, collect firewood and cut trees, all predominantly work of the womenfolk. However, hunting, an entirely male occupation in African society, was not allowed. "Shamba la Bibi" was therefore suggested by him as a short and snappy

phrase to explain what could be done in a game reserve and what not - women's work, not men's.

Nowadays the advertising industry, the politicians and their spin doctors have carried the art of simplification to extremes. Complicated issues are translated into simple terms or slogans which even the most ignorant consumer or citizen will understand and keep in mind. "Shamba la Bibi" was such a device, and one which has survived for almost a century.

It was only in the 1920s and 30s that game reserves and national parks were turned into no-go areas which people were prevented from entering unless they had paid for permits. "Fortress conservation" or "fences and fines"-approach were the terms coined for this philosophy, which was to dominate wildlife conservation for the next sixty years, and which was quite different from the original German "shamba la bibi" concept.

Naming the Reserve "Selous"

Four of these German game reserves later became the nucleus of the Selous. Apart from the aforementioned Rufiji Game Reserve there was the Mahenge Reserve, situated between the Ruaha, Ulanga, Kilombero and Msolwa Rivers and which nowadays forms part of the Selous' eastern or Msolwa sector. Another reserve was the Matandu, along the Matandu river between Liwale and Kilwa. Part of it was later included the Selous. The larger eastern portion was, however, degazetted after the Second World War. The Matesi Game Reserve, south-east of the present Selous, was also dissolved by the British administration. After the first amendments and further expansions in the early 1920s and after the establishment of a Wildlife Division the British Colonial Government named the emerging entity the "Selous Game Reserve". This was done in honour of the hunter and writer Captain Frederick Courteney Selous, who had been killed in 1917 at Beho Beho in the reserve where his grave can still be found.