

Review, pp. 48 and 49, by Phyllis Lee

WILD HEART OF AFRICA. The Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania.

Rolf Baldus, editor. Paintings by Bodo Meir. Rowland Ward Publications, Johannesburg, 2009. ISBN 978 0 9802626 7 4.

In 1987, three rubber rafts set off from above Shuguli Falls on the Kilombero to paddle for 10 days down the Rufiji River through the heart of the Selous. In those days, we were rafting through the largest so-called “protected area” in Africa, but it was in the throws of a poaching epidemic; now the Selous is a revived World Heritage Site but in need of further recognition and protection. This book is a poetic and artistic journey through the history and ecology of the Selous over the last 150 years, the story of how the most recent transitions came about, and the many individuals and institutions that have acted together with the Government of Tanzania to try to give the Selous a future.

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My first experience of the region was living along the Ruaha River for a year in the mid 1970s, when Tanzania had few friends and the country’s development aims revolved around Ujamaa or villagisation. I have yet to see, in the 40 years since that first stay, an area of Africa as beautiful as this ecosystem. And every day on the Ruaha, we dreamt of following its course to the sea. The rafting trip was an opportunity to live part of that dream, even though many changes had taken place in the intervening years, changes which are documented in this book.

The authors are a talented group – Oxbridge ecologists, Scottish cartographers and explorers, German scientists, Tanzanian wardens, rangers and scouts. Since the time of Uhuru, the German connection – which originated in Wilhelm I’s day – has actively but quietly operated via the GTZ to support and sustain Tanzania’s aims for its reserves and parks. The British connection, dating from the days of slavery and expanded after World War I, is also strong in here. The book is illustrated with beautiful water colour sketches of animals and scenery which, at least for me, capture the clarity, light, and animals of the Selous with vivid accuracy. It is worth buying and owning for these alone! But these glorious paintings do not diminish the quality of the writing and the sense of commitment and passion that each author brought to his subject.

The Selous is in some ways a contradiction in conservation. It “pays its way” by licensed hunting, and it is argued here that hunting preserves the Selous’ wildlife and is both ethically conducted and sustainable. This is the government’s attitude, and whether it is ethical, acceptable or indeed justifiable in terms of carbon footprints traded against other non-consumptive uses will be argued long into the future. The new threats of mineral exploitation may spell the approaching end of this largest of protected areas and of all its resident species – which are now found in few places elsewhere in Africa.

The proceeds of this book go to protect the Selous – if the excellent writing and superb paintings are not enough of an inducement to buy it, then the thought that you can contribute to the future of the ecosystem in an entirely ethical and non-consumptive way should be enough to make everyone purchase it!