Jane Carruthers

Changing Perspectives on Wildlife in Southern Africa, C.1840 to C.1914

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how a number of writers in English articulated their attitudes toward southern Africa’s indigenous mammal megafauna from c.1840 to just before the First World War. In changing contexts of declining wild animal numbers, it examines how attitudes and the expression of those attitudes—together with developments in biology—altered with the modernization of government and the economy. To some extent, it also explores the human and other values placed on certain species of animals, including ideas about extinction, notions of what constitutes “vermin,” and evolving opinions on nature and environmental conservation. Some of the concerns discussed here include lines of thinking that continue, albeit much altered, into our own time.

Over the last 150 years, how people have written about wildlife in Africa has changed considerably. Transformations have occurred at the levels of ethical values and artistic and scientific expression. They include the degree of respect accorded to nonhuman animals in the wild, ideas about what constitutes acceptable human behavior toward animals, theories of animal behavioral ecology, management of wildlife and conservation, and the place of certain
species within functioning ecosystems. The literary discourse has altered accordingly. Patterson (1907) employed a tone not found in modern environmental publications:

About three weeks after my arrival [in Uganda] I was roused one morning about daybreak and told that one of my jemadars, a fine powerful Sikh named Ungan Singh, had been seized in his tent during the night, and dragged off and eaten by a lion... [Another workman] graphically described how, at about midnight, the lion suddenly put his head in at the open tent door and seized Ungan Singh... by the throat. The unfortunate fellow cried out “choro” (“let’s go”), and threw his arms up round the lion’s neck. The next moment he was gone, and his panic-stricken companions lay helpless, forced to listen to the terrible struggle that took place outside... On hearing this dreadful story I at once set out to try to track the animal... and found it an easy matter to follow the route taken by the lion, as he appeared to have stopped several times before beginning his meal. Pools of blood marked these halting places, where he doubtless indulged in the man-eater’s habit of licking the skin off so as to get at the fresh blood... On reaching the spot where the body had been devoured, a dreadful spectacle presented itself. The ground all round was covered with blood and morsels of flesh and bones, but the unfortunate jemadar’s head had been left intact, save for the holes made by the lion’s tusks seizing him, and lay a short distance away from the other remains, the eyes staring wide open with a startled, horrified look in them... (pp. 21-24)

Patterson’s macabre description obviously was written to shock his readers, but before dismissing the hyperbole as inappropriately outmoded, it must be acknowledged that writing such as this in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries paid great dividends in creating publicity for, and interest in, Africa’s wildlife. The legacy of this is that enormous numbers of tourists currently visit southern Africa, and they contribute substantially to a developing economy. Their passion is to see the “Big Five”—lion, elephant, buffalo, rhinoceros, and leopard. These are the species that humans traditionally fear the most, but they are not necessarily the most interesting biologically, most attractive aesthetically, or most characteristic of the greatest biodiversity. By contrast, the “Small Five”—ant-lion, elephant shrew, buffalo weaver, rhinoceros beetle, and leopard tortoise have never captured the public imagination.
Hunting Literature of the Mid-nineteenth Century

Many nineteenth-century writings by sportsmen about their hunting exploits are important in southern African literature and remain popular to this day. Books of this kind include those by Harris (1840, 1852), Selous (1897, 1908), Baldwin (1863) and Cumming (1850, 1911). In the mid-1830s, Harris probably was the first recreational visitor to the frontier area north of the Vaal River where wildlife of all species was still abundant. Differing from any previous account of southern Africa’s natural history, Harris popularized the excitement of his sport and the beauty of the animals he killed by writing in an exuberantly graphic style and by including his own attractive illustrations. Harris had an enormous impact in Britain. Many other sportsmen were inspired to follow his example. Some of these publications were contemporary best-sellers, running into a number of editions and making a good profit for their authors (Ritvo, 1987). The period was propitious: The popular press and the reading public in Britain were growing, and people were fascinated by descriptions and anecdotes about creatures and landscapes so different from their own (Pratt, 1992; Stafford, 1989; Carter, 1987).

It is appropriate to consider these hunter-visitors as the first wildlife eco-tourists of southern Africa. Nash (1979) argued that “nature” was actively traded on an import-export basis in an international market—the traded commodity being “experience.” In addition to those who are able to have the physical experience, however, there was in the nineteenth century (as there remains in the twenty-first) a large community of armchair nature-enthusiasts whose eagerness “to consume motion pictures, television specials, and wildlife magazines and books . . . is an important form of nature-importing” (p. 519).

Although Nash (1979) would describe the nineteenth-century hunter-visitors in South Africa as nature tourists engaging in a particular exchange, Gray (1979) castigates them as “raiders” In his view, they extracted value from the region without making any reciprocal investment. Without a stake in the future of the country, their sole objective was selfish and transient entertainment (p. 97). They enjoyed slaughtering wild animals by the hundreds, describing the activity with relish, often in terms of a successful military campaign. Others have pointed out that these sport-hunters were enacting an ancient ritual and were participants in a masculine rite that many of them were denied.
at home. Sport hunting is a “game” (as the name of the quarry suggests); only certain animals, among them the largest and most attractive male antelope, knew how to play it (Graham, 1973; MacKenzie, 1988; Ritvo, 1987). Sometimes, however, the game did not proceed as intended. Baldwin (1863, p. 4) brought a pack of seven expensive deerhounds with him to southern Africa with an expectation of exciting chases, only to discover that in thick thorn-bush these well-bred and elegant hunting dogs were quite useless and quickly succumbed to disease.

In addition to thrilling descriptions of encounters with wild animals, the mid-nineteenth century hunting literature includes another dominating trope: that of an “arcadia” (Gillmore, 1886; Ritvo, 1987). Sport hunting in Africa was described as freedom from a constricting Western lifestyle (Anderson, 1888, p. 3). While England was a landscape of private property, crowded cities, and increasing industrialization, wild and open country in southern Africa beckoned and with it the luxury of solitude—“a savage loneliness” (Harris, 1840, p. 62). Kirby (1896) delighted in the fact that one could “throw off for a while the trammels of conventionality and civilization,” leave letters unanswered, and taste “the inimitable joys, the unfettered freedom, of an African hunter’s life” (p. vii). Many similar examples might be quoted. Atcherley (1879) summarized these emotions:

You are under no apprehension of trespassing; nobody can warn you off. You can kick out your legs and sprawl, without danger of breaking something or knocking out somebody’s eye. Nobody is here to bother about the man coming to be paid for the gas, or even to tell you to get up and “behave”. You do not care a rap for politics or the symmetry of your neck-tie. Nothing restrains you. You can expand your lungs and breathe God’s free air with a sense of glorious independence. There is bread and meat in the bag; some brandy even left in the bottle. No king is happier than you. (pp. 141-142)

During the early and mid-Victorian period, Western society generally regarded killing wild animals for pleasure as morally acceptable; however, it was restricted to the refined and elite. Standards of “civilization” could be measured by the reasons people hunted (Carruthers, 1995a; MacKenzie, 1988; Ritvo, 1987). By the mid-nineteenth century, English sport-hunters were not the only whites in the interior of southern Africa. From the 1840s, Dutch-
speaking Boers—seeking land, African labor, and freedom from British domination in the Cape Colony—settled in the Transvaal in considerable numbers. The Boer community’s priorities were mercenary and practical, and their primary objective was physical and economic survival (Dunbar, 1881; Gassiott, 1852; Cachet, 1882; Hofmeyr, 1890; Fuller, 1932). For this reason, their attitudes toward wildlife differed considerably from the sport-hunter’s yearning for liberty and recreational activity.

As pioneering colonial settlers, the Transvaalers had to live off the land. A later Transvaal State president, Kruger (1902) subsequently justified their extermination of wild animals in terms of clearing the land for agriculture and hastening the process of civilization and settlement. The Boers discovered wildlife to be an economic bounty. For a generation, market hunting sustained the independence of the emerging Afrikaner state. Ivory and hides were exported through the Cape and Natal in extremely large quantities, and the internal consumption of meat meant that precious livestock might survive to multiply. Wildlife provided a dependable income, not recreation (Potgieter, 1958). A clash of values was the consequence. Anderson (1888) noted that Boers were astounded that people hunted for amusement alone and neither used nor sold the by-products of their activities (p. 27). Other European visitors commented adversely that only primitive or backward people who believed that the earth revolved around the sun (as did many Boers), would destroy animals for their skins alone (Cunynghame, 1879, p. 281; Roche, 1878, p. 272).

Although valuing certain wild animal species as special totem animals, black African communities also hunted for trade commodities and subsistence rather than for pleasure. Their utilitarian outlook meant that the famous missionary-explorer David Livingstone, at least on one occasion, had to explain the ritual of sport hunting to a rather uncomprehending group of blacks (Gray, 1979, pp. 105, 106). It was commonly believed at the time that eating too much venison was both unhealthy and uncivilized, and Boers and Africans were considered lower class for enjoying this staple diet (Aylward, 1878, p. 239). Because of the similarity in their objectives and lifestyles, early Boer settlers north of the Vaal River often went into partnership with black hunters—so-called “swart skutte” (black shots)—to maximize hunting as a business venture. Africans were provided with firearms and sent into areas whites
avoided either because disease was prevalent or because hunting on horseback was impossible (Carruthers, 1995a; Wagner, 1980). It did not take long before the combination of sport and market hunting by thousands of black and white hunters decimated the immense herds seen by Harris (Kennedy, 1964, p. 54).

**Changing Contexts at the End of the Nineteenth Century**

Public awareness of, and concern about, the declining numbers of southern Africa’s wildlife introduced new values: Issues of cruelty, waste, and extinction began to dominate the discourse. Southern Africa had no tradition to compare with the nature writing in the United States by Romantics or Transcendentalists such as Thoreau, Marsh, and Muir who advocated respect for wilderness.

However, growing public disapproval of wanton killing allowed ideas of being a “nature lover” rather than a hunter of prowess to become more respectable. The ideal of British imperial masculinity slowly began to include the opinion that protecting wildlife was as morally and socially acceptable as killing it. Bryden (1897) was not ashamed to consider himself “a true lover of nature” (p. viii), and he considered the extinction of any wild mammal species to be a disgrace to humankind (Bryden, 1889, p. 402). Nonetheless, some people cared more than did others. The renowned hunter Selous (1908, pp. 130, 131) did not think the extinction of the blue buck *Hippotragus luctuatus* or quagga *Equus quagga* was a significant loss to humanity. As he explained, these two species were so similar to roan antelope *Hippotragus equinus* and plains zebra *Equus burchelli* that they really would not be missed from the animal kingdom (Selous; Carruthers, 1995a).

The upsurge in British imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century encouraged a language and ideology related to possession and ownership, and with it came protectionist ideas. When gold was discovered in the Transvaal in the late nineteenth century, many British immigrants came with the intention of remaining permanently and were not merely temporary visitors. Then, what was left of the wildlife of Africa increasingly was described in terms of “a precious inheritance of the Empire to be most jealously safeguarded” (Buxton, 1902, p. 116). The visible shortage of wildlife and the growing appre-
Association of the beauty of wild animals made sheer pleasure in slaughter morally less respectable (Ritvo, 1987). This line of thinking encouraged wildlife preservation in Africa and resulted in the first international fauna protection convention, drawn up in London in 1900 (Carruthers, 1995a; Hobley, 1933; MacKenzie, 1988).

The avoidance of cruelty was another growing concern. As Thomas (1983) has explained, compassion toward animals in middle-class Victorian England was growing, and brutality had to be prevented—more for the sake of those “less civilized” people who perpetrated the brutality than on behalf of the animals themselves (p. 187). In South Africa, sensitivity toward cruelty was expressed in racist terms. Whites who killed with bullets were acting ethically, but Africans had to be stopped from hunting—even for food in times of necessity—because the methods they used, principally traps and snares (restrictions on possessing firearms had by then been imposed on black people), were considered “cruel” and often resulted in lingering deaths (Carruthers, 1995a).

Consequently, later hunter-writers avoided blood-thirsty language when describing their antelope hunts. By the end of the nineteenth century, the increasingly sensitive reading public no longer admired those who so blatantly enjoyed their killing sprees. On the contrary, the exploits of these people came to be regarded as wasteful and unsporting. Cumming, once described as “bold, enterprising and skilful” (Ritvo, 1987, p. 250) was later castigated as “an unprincipled man and an indiscriminate slaughterer” (Denman, 1957, p. 192; Buxton, 1902, p. 116; Bryden, 1897, p. 299). The new literature was generated principally by “penitent butchers”—former hunters who claimed to be familiar with natural history (Fitter & Scott, 1978; Carruthers, 1995b).

While writers like Harris or Cumming considered natural history a by-product of their sport, later authors gave it as their motivation. Chapman (1930) stated that as long as a determination to learn, rather than personal pride, was the dominant emotion, a hunter might be excused his carnage (p. 244). Protectionist Bryden (1894) thus forgave Selous his slaughter, because in contrast to “mere mercenary skin hunters,” “whatever damage he may have done . . . the magnificent specimens of great game sent home by Selous to the Natural History and other museums amply acquit him of the charge of mere wasteful slaughter” (p. 546). In this way, recreational hunters did not
stop their activities but reframed their public rationale for doing so. Dead
wildlife was useful for “science,” and animals had to be killed to advance its
cause.

This was the heyday of formal taxonomy, and with it there was a widening
gulf between professional and amateur. Professionals generally were museum
people with a duty to catalogue as many species as they could, and to this
end the larger the collection the better. Museums were the repositories of
imperial knowledge, and local institutions also were important in advancing
“national collections” in many British colonies (Barber, 1980; Jardine, Secord,
& Spary, 1996; Farber, 1982; Sheets-Pyenson, 1988; Robin, 2003; Davis, 1996).

Some of the hunter-writers, as experienced outdoorsmen and often as com-
petent observers, believed that as amateurs or field naturalists they served a
useful scientific purpose by carefully measuring the animals they had killed
and saving their heads and horns for display (Selous, 1908; Ritvo, 1987).
Evaluating the morality of killing on the basis of its purpose persists in wildlife
management and conservation biology. One only has to consider the seman-
tics involved in “killing” and “culling.”

The kind of knowledge that hunters amassed was unrelated to habitat, land-
scape, or the ideology of evolutionary development (Selous; Bryden, 1897;
Pitman, 1931; Percival, 1928). Purposeful collecting to establish the “biggest”
by way of size or variety—in the absence of environmental thinking or an
animal ecology—was believed to advance the cause of natural history. The
desire for the largest game trophies therefore did not diminish when wild
animals were killed as scientific specimens. Keeping the competitive spirit
alive was the regular publication of Ward’s Records of big game, which began
publication in 1892 and listed all African trophy records.

The element of thrills and danger was diverted into hunting specifically for
“vermin” species (Dunlap, 1988). Although it became less respectable to kill
numbers of rare antelope with gusto, one still could be bloodthirsty about
ridding the world of vermin and write about it in exciting language. The cat-
alog of undesirable species was a long one. It included many mammals and
reptiles who today are extremely ecologically important and some of whom
are rare—wild dog (Lycaon pictus), lion (Panthera leo), leopard (Panthera pardus),
cheetah (Acinonyx jubatus), crocodile (Crocodylus niloticus), jackal (Canis
mesomelas), and hyena (Crocuta crocuta). From the perspective of the twenty-
first century, it is difficult to comprehend the mindset that condones killing wildlife merely because of anthropomorphically distasteful appearance or habits. Crocodile were loathed because they were “an animated trap” and thus made one’s “flesh creep,” (Percival, 1928, pp. 214-215; Pitman, 1931, p. 111), while hyena needed to be wiped off the earth because they were “a hideous family” (Bryden, 1893, p. 59) and wild dog often devoured their prey while the prey was still alive (Stevenson-Hamilton, 1912).

Meinertzhagen (1957) provides a graphic example of how these values found expression. A hunter in East Africa, Meinertzhagen was greatly angered one evening when a troop of baboons defended themselves by killing his favorite and most aggressive hunting dog who was harassing them. The dog went by the improbable name of Baby. Meinertzhagen wrote the following account:

...They caught her, and with diabolical yelling and grunting they tore her to bits in a second. I ran up, yelling as I went to try to save poor Baby, but it was no use. I saw the disgusting creatures making off with her limbs. (p. 172)

Revenge was the only way in which Baby’s death would be assuaged, and all night Meinertzhagen (1957) plotted it. By daybreak, he had rounded up 30 local men with rifles and bayonets and—in a well planned military maneuver—killed 25 members of the baboon troop that numbered about 40, noting: “We killed every full-grown male, and I was pleased” (173). For good measure, he then shot an impala *Aepyceros melampus* and a hartebeest *Alcephalus buselaphus* to feed the men who had taken part in his avenging campaign that was, as he put it, designed to “teach those baboons a lesson” (p. 174).

By using language in this way, vermin with their loathsome looks and unacceptable behavior provided a culturally acceptable target for human savagery. Animal ethics were set aside when dealing with vermin predators. Moreover, in many parts of the world—including southern Africa—“vermin clubs” were popular outlets for hunters and farmers: To accelerate the extermination of these species, government paid bounties for vermin skins (Dunlap, 1988; Beinart & Coates, 1995; Carruthers 1995a).

Certain vermin were considered to be worthy opponents of courageous men, particularly the lion, a creature for centuries regarded in mythology and folklore as the “king of the beasts.” Because they preyed upon antelope, lions...
were despised for being in direct competition with humans, and lions sometimes killed humans. Hunting lions came to be regarded as the ultimate test of masculine bravery and strength. Many hunter-writers included among their anecdotes tales of exciting adventures with “the great and terrible man-eating cat, the monarch of the African wilderness” (Selous, 1908, p. 44). Entire books were devoted to descriptions of lion hunting, and lively rivalry existed among hunters as to who had killed the greatest number of lion (Patterson, 1907; Lyell, 1935; Ritvo, 1987).

**Wildlife Protection at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century**

These changing values encouraged the protection of certain African species in the early years of the twentieth century. It was a “game” movement rather than a “wildlife” one. Although there were debates about which species of wild animals deserved to be protected—and to what extent—the question of a broader environmental sensitivity did not arise. The British sport-hunting community galvanized around the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire, founded December 1903 in London by Buxton. This society began the first regular journal devoted to wildlife protection in the British Empire. Its business was to constrain sport hunters from over-hunting. Its major efforts were to establish bureaucracies relating to hunting legislation and game reserves and to disseminate game protection propaganda (Fitter & Scott, 1978; MacKenzie, 1988).

By 1900, it was unusual to find large mammals in the wild in southern Africa, and local amateur naturalists seeking a wildlife experience began to study and collect smaller wild creatures and birds. Imperial hunters had not written about ornithology; thus, South Africa’s first popular account was an unusual publication. An ornithologist at the Transvaal Museum in Pretoria wrote *Sketches of South African bird life*, with photographic illustrations by an amateur birdwatcher from Grahamstown in the Cape Colony (Haagner & Ivy, 1908). The publication was supported by the South African Ornithologists’ Union, the subcontinent’s first specialist wildlife society that had been founded a few years earlier (Carruthers, 2004). The purpose of the book was to increase “the love for bird study in South Africa” and to encourage knowledge about the country’s own fauna—rather than celebrate exotic or European species.
Haagner and Ivy (1908) appeared after the end of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) during a period when British imperialism was waning in southern Africa and a local nationalism was developing between English- and Dutch-speakers. Dubow (2000, p. vi, p. 3) has argued that science was one of a number of forces in the creation of a newly integrated South Africa under white rule that advanced national pride and self-confidence. In addition to reflecting South Africa’s emerging nationhood, Haagner and Ivy can be regarded as pioneering because they prioritized aspects of what currently would be called ecology. Arranged by biome and behavior, Haagner and Ivy did not produce a systematic list species or a personal narrative but aimed to encourage the lay-person to contribute to scientific ornithology and bird conservation by observation and careful recording. Unlike large mammals, birds might be studied on a daily basis and close to home—one’s own garden or local outing spot made an appropriate study area.

As had happened in Australia, a number of Field Naturalist clubs were founded in the South African colonies that offered members a pleasant pastime, camaraderie, education, field outings, and a sense of worth and contribution (Carruthers, 2004; Robin, 2001; Griffiths, 1996). The Johannesburg Field Naturalists’ club was founded expressly because,

> South Africans need to be educated, so that it will not be necessary to import government entomologists and officials . . . surely persons born and bred in this country . . . would stand a better chance of successfully dealing with the problems in this country than outsiders whose education and training has been on an alien fauna and flora? (Cook, 1908, n. p.)

That many avian species were believed to be little-known and aesthetically beautiful human allies in the war between agriculturalists and insect pests underpinned bird conservation in South Africa (Fitzsimons, 1923).

This was a different ethic from that underlying large mammal protection, which was to create special game sanctuaries in which vermin would be eradicated and the numbers of rare sport-hunting species increased. In due course (in 1926), one of these turn-of-the-century game reserves in South Africa was enlarged to become the renowned Kruger National Park. The first warden, Stevenson-Hamilton (1867-1957), was an intelligent man.
Although professionally untrained in natural history, he read widely, observed carefully, and became an accomplished field biologist. Three years into his post, Stevenson-Hamilton (1905) had come to what then was a radical conclusion: The increase in antelope species “tends to keep the carnivora within the district and not drive them out.” Soon he was voicing sarcastic personal opinions on the ethics of “so-called sportsmen” and their sadistic desire to hunt lion. Stevenson-Hamilton was the first professional game warden in Africa to consider it part of his task as wildlife manager to educate the public about the landscape and wild animals within a game reserve and to position wildlife and protected areas as a common, natural, national heritage. In his first book, Stevenson-Hamilton (1912) provides a case in point. Although, at this time, his writing was descriptive and lacked an explicit conceptual foundation or innovative understanding of ecosystem theory, Stevenson-Hamilton communicated more knowledge and understanding of animal behavior and habitat use than found in any earlier literature (Carruthers, 2001). As an ecological generalist, fascinated by behavior and animal psychology, he emphasized how a species functioned while it was alive, rather than what “fun” it was to kill it or collect it. Stevenson-Hamilton speculated about population dynamics, the role of coloration and behavioral patterns and, in doing so, illuminated some of the modern and current attitudes to wildlife, especially about vermin. Insofar as vermin destruction in game reserves was concerned, he concluded, “Now I think, the nearer to nature the better in a reserve, so when I see a lioness with her children, I feel like saying ‘good luck to you!’” (Carruthers, 1995a, p. 65). Stevenson-Hamilton’s fresh attitude and expression was attractive to Hornaday, Director of the New York Zoological Park and leading United States protectionist and scientist of his time. When Stevenson-Hamilton (1912) was published (with a foreword by their mutual friend Theodore Roosevelt) Hornaday wrote to the author: “I have grown weary of tales of slaughter and extermination, and your book of preservation comes like a cold spring bursting forth in a sun-parched desert.”

By the First World War, writing about wildlife in southern Africa had developed from a genre of sport and adventure to a literature that was beginning to take wildlife seriously as objects of ecological study and that later burgeoned into conservation biology and wildlife management.

* Jane Carruthers, University of South Africa
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Correspondence should be addressed to Jane Carruthers, Department of History, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, 0003 South Africa. E-mail: CARRUEJ@unisa.ac.za.

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