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The Use of Colonial Conservation Efforts in Etosha and Other Game Reserves to Damage Indigenous Namibians

The introduction of Etosha National Park by the German colonial administration in 1907 as a protected game reserve was loaded with many motives in addition to future consequences. Though administrative goals boiled down to *conservation of fauna*, game reserve policies (especially those of Etosha) led to a variety of destructive forces upon local Namibians with policies relocating people away from important land and failure to prevent local game from endangering humans. Local Namibian farmers living near game reserves such as Etosha and Hai//om people living within Etosha also became a part of the interplay between nature and human culture.¹ This interplay dictates that environmental effects create negative outcomes upon humans who in turn harmfully impact nature in methods not intended at the inception of the process.² To understand the effects of nature-culture interactions stemming from colonial game reserve establishment in Namibia, a study of the effects upon animal populations in Etosha National Park and other former reserves following widespread game reserve establishment will be considered alongside human intervention and effects that came with the game reserve laws. The conflicts between colonial administrators and their handling of local game and human

¹ For anecdotal accounts of Namibian farmers in Ovamboland being directly affected by game encroachment, refer to the *Game and Carnivora* sections in NAN, NAO 17-21, *Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland* by Native Commissioner Hahn from his time as Native Commissioner from 1915-1946, National Archives of Namibia.

² On the nature-culture relationship and the tied interactions between humans and nature known as “enviroming”, see Kreike, *Environmental Infrastructure in African History: Examining the Myth of Natural Resource Management in Namibia*, pp. 2-8 and pp. 21-29, National Library of Namibia.

farming populations stemmed from different ideas of what consisted of *conservation*. An important law governing the conservation and/or extermination of specific animals in game reserves in relation to humans most importantly includes black Namibian disarmament in Ovamboland.³ This law was a prime example of a disconnect between conservationist administration and local Namibians. A combination of these differing goals regarding *wildlife conservation* between colonial administration and local Namibians during the formation of Etosha and the interconnectivity of nature and human culture has resulted in lasting negative consequences for certain species of wildlife and local Namibians that may never be resolved. The subtle use of the game reserves by colonial administration to mask the damage of planned assaults upon the way of life of indigenous Namibians can be realized by analyzing the founding goals of game reserves and the subsequent actions taken by colonial administration.

To meet the primary objective of conserving game (and royal game especially) within game reserves, the livelihoods of humans caught in the physical path of Etosha's boundaries and in the sights of predators were threatened. How successful were these efforts to increase the overall populations of game in reserves? Early estimates of game populations around the time of the park's inception were compiled by Guy Chester Shortridge.⁴ Though not without obvious sampling errors as Shortridge did not have access to an airplane for surveying all of Etosha, Shortridge's census gives an insight into the endangered species needing repopulation according to the park administrators.⁵ Two important species of royal game, elephant and lion, were

³ On black Namibian disarmament, see NAN, NAO 19-21, *Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland: 1932* pp. 12, *1933* pp. 6, *1934* pp. 3, *1938* pp. 41, National Archives of Namibia.

⁴ Early reports of game populations in Etosha before WWII were sparse and independently reported without any intervention from the official administrators of the game reserve. Information via Werner Hillebrecht, Director of the National Archives of Namibia, personal communication, 2017.

⁵ *Ground census of selected species in the Etosha Pan - Ovamboland regions during 1926, based on data contained in reports to the Secretary for South West Africa* by Guy Chester Shortridge, A.201/10, National Archives of Namibia.

heavily prioritized by the colonial administration as was noted before in detailed accounts from the Ovamboland Reports and can be compared to a modern census of Etosha performed in 1998 to quantify the success of the conservation effort for these species. Elephant populations in Shortridge's 1926 census were estimated to be nonexistent with the last known sighting of elephants in Etosha before that period occurring in 1881. However, elephants reappeared in Etosha in the 1950's and this is attributed to the conservation efforts of the colonial administration in barring the poaching of elephants and not allowing many farmers (as mentioned before) to protect their livestock from the species.⁶ Today, the population of elephants is estimated to be over 2000 within the boundaries of Etosha.⁷ Clearly, the elephant population has prospered as a part of the overall conservation efforts that have historically endangered local Namibian farmers within the last century of game reserve conservation. Similarly, lions have experienced similar positive trends in conservation. While they have not had their populations increase dramatically, the population in Etosha has stabilized.⁸

However, even the game conservation efforts of colonial administrators have failed in some aspects. While the former examples given have been of royal game which have had their populations prosper, wild dogs have suffered since the introduction of game reserves in 1907 and have decreased in numbers.⁹ Wild dogs were not highly valued by the colonial administration and were never referred to as being within the category of "royal game" hinting at their relative lack of value in comparison to other species like elephant and lion. Instead, wild dogs were

⁶ *African Elephant Status Report 2002: An Update from the African Elephant* by J.J. Blanc, pp. 6, National Library of Namibia.

⁷ *Aerial Census of Wildlife in Northern Namibia August-November 1998* by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of the Republic of Namibia (Alice Jarvis and Rowan Martin), pp. 68, National Library of Namibia.

⁸ *Demography of Lions in the Etosha National Park, Namibia* by P.E. Stander, pp. 1, National Library of Namibia.

⁹ *Background management and species management guidelines for Namibia's rare and valuable wildlife: African Wild Dog* by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of the Republic of Namibia (Alice Jarvis), pp. 5-6, National Library of Namibia.

viewed by the colonial administration as vermin. Interestingly, local Namibians also considered wild dogs a troubling species for different reasons being that they were dangerous to their livestock. Historically during the colonial period, Namibian game reserves have been more dangerous for wild dogs than living outside of protected areas (where wild dogs were persecuted by local Namibians but on a less concentrated scale).¹⁰ Even when unintentionally assisting local Namibians with their policies on conservation by lowering the wild dog population, the colonial administrators chose to act for different reasons. No efforts to quell the wild dog population were done for reasons to protect the livelihoods of local Namibian farmers. Even acts of “conservation” that appeared to impact the local Namibian farmers in positive ways were not performed with that intention in mind.

To understand the disconnect between administration and local Namibians regarding Etosha National Park, a thorough review of the documents calling for the creation of game reserves in what is now Namibia provides a view into an administration with a variety of motives for protecting game. Etosha was established along with two other game reserves in 1907 after many years of commercial overhunting of game in the designated areas.¹¹ The species of game targeted and prohibited from being hunted included giraffe, zebra, and lion (all of which would be referred to later as *royal game*). In the document establishing Etosha, references were made throughout to a history of overhunting these species (and others) for economic reasons but at an unsustainable rate. The law clearly intended to obstruct the actions of commercial hunters in the beginning as an additional clause to the game reserves stated that vehicle use was prohibited in

¹⁰ *The African Wild Dog: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan* by IUCN/SSC Canid Specialist Group (David Whyte Macdonald), pp. 64, National Library of Namibia.

¹¹ Taken from the original document dictating the establishment of game reserves by Governor Friedrich von Lindequist. For full details on the exact boundaries and species to be protected, see ZBU 1908, MII E.1, *Wildreservate – Generalia*, National Archives of Namibia.

the park unless otherwise given permission by the German colonial administration.¹² From this evidence alone, the reasons behind establishing Etosha point to an interest in preserving game against the unsustainable overhunting performed by commercial groups with purely economic interests and zero interest in sustainably hunting royal game (much like the policy we recognize today in Etosha). However, colonial administrators had their own clear interests in protecting royal game for their own economic benefit. In the same establishing document, colonial motives for preserving game are explained. Governor von Lindequist lays out his belief that game products are a freely available resource for the administration and the country's benefit if game reserves could be established where game populations could be increased and hunted for profit "in the interest of every individual" without disturbance from commercial hunters.¹³

Despite the mention of "every individual", there are no references to the roles of local Namibians in the context of Etosha's establishment and it is unclear if von Lindequist refers only to the German colonial administration. Instead, the colonial administration condemned local farming efforts around newly established game reserves and directly created reasons against keeping Hai//om people within Etosha.¹⁴ Nevertheless, a clear set of goals was established by the colonial administration in 1907: Game, with a special emphasis on royal game, in Etosha would

¹² From *South West African Administration Nature Conservation and Tourism Board, Article IV, 1908*, National Library of Namibia.

¹³ Governor von Lindequist poses Etosha and the other game reserves as a pool for generating profit through increasing populations of game and hunting them sustainably as "The high economic value of game in the country is known to everybody. The capital which we have in the game population in the country would exceed several millions. Each inhabitant should try to protect the game because it is in the interest of every individual. Game Reserves...might be established where the game could increase...where it could be shot and processed". Governor von Lindequist indicates in this section that Etosha is not a simple establishment to protect against overhunting and to preserve the beauty of untouched wildlife. Rather, it is possible that such game reserves could be a means of wealth for the colony. Seen in ZBU 1908, MII E.1, *Wildreservate – Generalia*, pp. 2, National Archives of Namibia.

¹⁴ In direct conflict with local Namibian farmers, von Lindequist writes "The defined reserves...are not fit for farms either now or in the near future". effectively stating that all farms within boundaries would not increase the efficiency of increasing game populations (the primary goal of the game reserve). Farms bordering Etosha are not mentioned but it is doubtful that they would be encouraged by colonial administration given their proximity to the protected game and the perception that Hai//om were a threat to game. Seen in ZBU 1908, MII E.1, *Wildreservate – Generalia* pp. 2, § 1, National Archives of Namibia.

be protected from commercial and Hai//om overhunting with the added benefit that the colonial administration could grow the population of game and sustainably hunt for their own economic benefit. With this motive in mind, Hai//om people and locals living around Etosha were actively forced out of Etosha or left unconsidered during the establishment of the game reserves. The economic interests of the colonial administration and their lack of foresight into the needs of Namibians and Hai//om people already living in Etosha had the potential to lead to a variety of damaging practices to be forced upon Namibians after the establishment of colonial game reserves.¹⁵

Effects on humans were noticeable after the establishment of Etosha. In addition to many unintended consequences towards humans because of game protection, Hai//om people already existing within the boundaries of Etosha were actively planned to be relocated or used for colonial labor (though the German colonial administration never followed through with this policy). To end the Hai//om practice of hunting and gathering, a practice that could hurt conservation efforts in the game reserves according to colonial beliefs, relocation outside of Etosha was an early option proposed by the colonial administration.¹⁶ With the proposal to employ them on farms or at the very least keep them away from game, the administration labelled Hai//om individuals immediately as resources endangering the colonial economic prospects via threatening game within Etosha. Administrators could categorize their mistreatment of the Hai//om culture and people as a necessary step to help animal conservation. Policies that *did* become implemented by the colonial administration included efforts to reduce

¹⁵ For more insight into the level of importance that the German colonial administration held between game and local Namibians, see *The Vast White Place* by Ute Dieckmann, pp. 125, National Library of Namibia.

¹⁶ See *Distriktamt Namutoni*, Bericht. pp. 1. ZBU W II O.4. (1910), National Archives of Namibia.

the potential of the Hai//om people to hunt game by prohibiting the use of guns and allowing for only the use of bows and arrows to hunt.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the Germans and their intended actions set a precedent for future injustices by South African colonists against the same group of Hai//om people in Etosha. Adolf Fischer (the first Game Warden of Etosha National Park) made it clear in his reports that the role of Bushmen (often used by the colonial administrations to include Hai//om people under this term) in the development of the German colony would be nil after their actions in Etosha.¹⁸ In other words, the grand plan revolving around the park's goals dictated the absence of bushmen in order to be successful. South African administrators continued many of the practices of condemning Hai//om interactions with royal game. A 1952 letter by a South African Station Commander documented a "Bushman hunting a giraffe with bow and arrow" which is followed by a message saying "The administration is not in favour of their hunting protected game" while urging the Assistant Native Commissioner to send assistance to deal with the matter.¹⁹ The phrase, "a Bushman hunting a giraffe" is incredibly vague about the danger that the Bushmen placed the giraffe in and even the reasons for sending the letter requesting assistance. Additionally, a 1948 limitation on the rights of Bushmen and their hunting practices was introduced with a restriction on all hunting save wildebeest and zebra.²⁰

¹⁷ See *The Vast White Place* by Ute Dieckmann, pp. 130, National Library of Namibia.

¹⁸ Fischer wrote "The Heigum will soon face the choice of becoming farm laborers or moving to areas where they will eventually disappear...Heigum are not essential for the colony" as found in *Geography and Ethnography: Caprivi and Okavango*, pp. 1, ZBU F XIII B.4 (1909), National Archives of Namibia.

¹⁹ Note the importance of this letter having come from a local level and being reported to the Assistant Native Commissioner. See *Hunting of Game by Bushmen - Letter from Station Commander of Nurugas to the Assistant Native Commissioner*, SWAA 459, A50/120 (1952), National Archives of Namibia.

²⁰ For full details of the ruling see *Correspondence of the Secretary and the Native Commissioner*, SWAA A511/1, 1948b/c, National Archives of Namibia.

The colonial antagonism against the Hai//om that existed since the Germans first established Etosha had the potential to result in greater losses for the Hai//om beyond losing hunting privileges (which it did). Forty-six years after the German founders of Etosha proposed the relocation of Hai//om populations to areas outside the reserve, a South African “Commission for the Preservation of Bushmen” (which included the Game Warden of Etosha at the time) required the movement of all Hai//om individuals to leave Etosha’s borders and suggested that they employ themselves on farms.²¹ Finally, the colonial side-goals of damaging the indigenous cultures that first arose with the German founding of the game reserve came into physical fruition. The Hai//om were forced outside of the park seemingly to conserve the game hunting business and used as a resource for the rest of the colony. Due to the colonial handling of conservation, the Hai//om were transformed from hunters and gatherers living in the Etosha Pan to laborers in unfamiliar areas within the span of a half-century which effectively destroyed their culture that existed before the establishment of the game reserves. The key similarity between the two colonial administrations and their handling of the Hai//om people in and around protected game lands like Etosha was their likeness to continually condemn the practices of the Hai//om regardless of whether they posed any real threat to the local game in Etosha. Clearly, game conservation in hopes of generating profits took reservations over the preservation of an ethnic group’s ability to live peacefully in their homeland and was used to justify their cultural injustices against local Namibians.

In addition to the planned subjugation of the Hai//om living within Etosha, there was also damage done to the livelihood of other black Namibians living on the borders of newly created

²¹ See *Secretary to the Administrator-in-Executive Committee*, SWAA A50/67b, 1953a, National Archives of Namibia for more info. This mandate did not have an explicit reason listed explaining the removal.

game reserves around Ovamboland (including Etosha). Human-wildlife conflicts increased with the ban on endangering royal game in reserves in conjunction with a ban on local Namibians owning rifles that was enacted with the introduction of Native Commissioner Carl Hugo Hahn to the administration in 1915.²² Numerous accounts of elephants and lions encroaching upon kraals and threatening to kill valuable livestock were given in Monthly Reports. Of course, these two species were repeatedly focused on in reports because they were considered “royal game” and conserved more than other predators in the area. Even before the establishment of game reserves, local farmers considered these species to be dangerous to their farms, livestock, and their own lives. The importance of livestock to farmers in the area was noted by Hahn as he wrote: “The Ovambo has a great love for cattle and it is his only bank here. Numbers count more than quality”.²³ Clearly, livestock were extremely important to the farmers and predatory threats to them that could not be defended against were an area of concern. In the past, modern guns originally provided by the colonial administration were the main form of defense against these predators.²⁴ Alongside this, the gun confiscation policy was reported to be extremely effective in disarming the Ovambo people to “bring game back to parts where it was formerly shot and harassed”. This belief was expressed consistently and Hahn even attributes the increase in game populations over 1933-1943 to the disarmament of the Ovambo.²⁵ Game hunting was directly blamed on indigenous Namibians using the disarmament laws and official Ovamboland reports.

²² Hahn’s Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland each include a section on the status of the gun confiscation effort. The areas affected by the confiscations included areas around game reserves and Etosha. See NAN, NAO 18-21, *Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland: 1927-1943*, National Archives of Namibia.

²³ NAN, NAO 21, *Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland: 1946*, pp. 3, National Archives of Namibia.

²⁴ NAN, NAO 20, *Monthly Reports for Ovamboland: Feb.-Apr. 1920*, National Archives of Namibia.

²⁵ NAN, NAO 19, *Monthly and Quarterly Reports for Ovamboland: 1932*, pp. 22. and NAN, NAO 20, *Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland: 1943*, pp. 20, National Archives of Namibia.

The need to conserve royal game at all costs combined with the lack of understanding of farming practices and needs were made evident in the reports by Hahn. In a report from 1937, Hahn writes, “Natives often complain about losses caused by carnivorous animals...this is due to their own carelessness and laziness. When given rifles for the protection of their stock...they abuse this privilege and indulge in shooting game”.²⁶ Hahn pins the issue of stock loss to the locals and their own stupidity while reinforcing his policy of disarmament. An implication is given that rifles are in fact effective for protecting livestock but again attributes the game losses to the carelessness of the farmers handling the weapons. Once again, the colonial administrators place the blame on local Namibians and accuse them of endangering game to a high degree. This strategy could then be used in the future to justify actions made against the local Namibians. Of course, the colonial administration prioritized the safety of royal game in and around the game reserves even while the needs of local farmers were unmet due to the lack of protection against royal game. In fact, counts of poached elephants would be listed in annual reports alongside the damage that was done by royal game to farmers’ kraals. This occurrence was all too common with many accounts of lion attacks on cattle, elephants consuming mopane that was intended for human use, and even elephants destroying waterholes.²⁷ Attacks against local farmers for poor decision-making were all to justify the conservation of royal game above many other issues within the area. The creation of game reserves and subsequent game laws brought dangerous

²⁶ NAN, NAO 20, *Monthly Reports for Ovamboland: Jan.-Feb. 1937*, National Archives of Namibia.

²⁷ NAN, NAO 21, *Monthly and Annual Reports for Ovamboland: Mar.-Apr. 1941*, pp. 7, 1946, pp. 12, National Archives of Namibia. In addition, a modern study on elephants in Namibia and their past damage to human settlements in the form of competition with humans for natural resources such as water is found in *Background management and species management guidelines for Namibia's rare and valuable wildlife: Savanna elephant* by the the Ministry of Environment and Tourism of the Republic of Namibia, PA/3403 (2008), National Archives of Namibia.

predators into contact with defenseless farmers who suffered as a result of the colonial administration's willful ignorance towards their plight.

Without a doubt, game population data has shown the success of the conservation efforts spearheaded by Namibia's German colonial leaders in the early 20th century. These efforts have been continued to this day and most populations of royal game and standard game have thrived as a result. However, those successes have not come without unintended (and arguably *intended*) consequences to the local Namibian communities. By using game conservation as a primary motive, colonial administrations in Namibia were able to exploit the connection between nature and culture by actively exploiting the culture of indigenous Namibians to help the conservation efforts of the game reserves flourish. The German and South African colonial administrations both abused the nature-culture connection by continually placing nature conservation efforts regarding game reserves above efforts to assist the Hai//om and the local Namibian farmers. They then took this even further and subsequently blamed them for damaging the noble efforts to protect game (which were economically driven). Though it may be a stretch to claim that the game reserves were created *solely* to hurt local Namibians and their culture, it is evident that the game reserves were continually used by the colonial administrations to justify culturally damaging actions made against indigenous Namibians.