Wildlife Conservation Causes Deforestation in Colonial Namibia

Emmanuel Kreike

Summary

Colonial conservation in north-central Namibia between the 1920s and 1950s was effective in stabilizing wildlife populations. Ironically enough, however, successful wildlife conservation contributed to severe deforestation. The colonial administration created a large game preserve, prohibited the hunting of royal game, and disarmed the local population. Without firearms, villagers relied heavily on elaborate palisades and fences to protect themselves, their animals, and their crop fields from wildlife predation. Internal migrants and large numbers of refugees from neighboring southern Angola constructed new palisaded homesteads, with fields shielded by fences, and cut down much of the woody vegetation cover in the places they settled.

In general, colonial conservation policies and practices in Africa have been viewed positively with respect to their environmental impact in safeguarding Africa's fauna and flora, even as the objectives of the colonial administrations and their methods of preserving natural resources have been condemned as exploitative and destructive. Administrations used conservation to limit Africans' access to land, game, and other key commercial and subsistence resources to facilitate political control over subject populations and to force them into wage labor dependency. Colonial officials liberally employed force to protect flora and fauna and exacted draconian punishment to those caught breaking conservation regulations.

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Elephant, Etosha National Park, Namibia

Photo by Frank Vassen (2009).

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In north-central Namibia (known as Ovamboland) between the 1920s and 1940s, colonial conservation was effective in slowing down the decline of wildlife populations caused by animal diseases (e.g., rinderpest) and decades of overhunting. The colonial administration created the Etosha Game Preserve, prohibited the hunting of the Big Five throughout the region, and disarmed the population of Ovamboland. The confiscation of thousands of advanced firearms by the colonial administration greatly reduced the effectiveness of African hunting. As a result, elephants, lions, and large herds of wildebeest and zebra reappeared in the region. Ironically, the resurgent wildlife populations contributed to severe deforestation. Without firearms, and the colonial officials' unwillingness to intervene, villagers continued to rely on elaborate wooden palisades and fences to protect themselves and their food reserves, crops, livestock, and precious water stores against marauding elephants, lions, leopards, and wild dogs. Human-wildlife conflict was frequent. For example, on 27 December 1949, the Ondonga King Kambonde reported that four elephants that had entered his district damaged crops and water holes. He witnessed an elephant barging into the homestead of his neighbor, an elderly woman, and tearing open a large mud-plastered grain storage basket, depriving her of the food reserves she needed to survive the long dry season. Around densely-populated Ondangwa, woody vegetation was scarce and fences were far less secure. The woman probably lacked the resources or strength to maintain an effective palisade or fence to protect her home and food stores. Wildlife not only threatened livelihoods; sometimes, lives were at stake. In September 1953, a blind woman, a child, and an elderly man were killed by elephants in Ongandjera district.

The construction and maintenance of game-proof palisades and fences constituted a major drain on woody vegetation and labor resources. Moreover, internal migrants and large numbers of refugees from neighboring

southern Angola resettled in Ovamboland and constructed numerous new palisades and fenced farms, cutting down much of the woody vegetation in the places where they established new villages. New villages infringed on wildlife habitat, causing further human-wildlife conflict. Contemporary observers, including colonial officials and missionaries who noted the deforestation caused by the extensive use of elaborate palisades and fences, were greatly alarmed by the prospect of catastrophic desertification: the 6,000 new households established by Angolan refugees in Ovamboland between 1915 and 1933 alone would have led to the deforestation of at least 6,000 hectares.

View of the inside of a palisaded homestead in 1992. The palisade poles between the two men are recycled poles from the palisade surrounding the original homestead which was constructed in the 1920s, when the threat of wild animals was still real. Today's palisade, which is seen in the background, is much lower, reflecting the fact that when it was built during the 1980s, poles were increasingly scarce and predators were no longer a threat to this village.

Photo by Emmanuel Kreike.

There is an extensive body of literature adopting a political ecology approach that discusses how colonial nature conservation policies aimed at extending political, social, and economic control over subject populations and highlights the resulting loss of livelihood. This literature characterizes the colonial "nature state" as either steamrolling its indigenous victims or as paralyzed by indigenous resistance or bogged down by its miscomprehension of local environmental conditions. In north-central Namibia, the "nature state" proved weak in some realms, but strong and hegemonic in others, even as its policies had sometimes unintended consequences. The colonial state's effectiveness on the ground expanded and contracted over time, suggesting

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the need to differentiate the nature state in time and place, even within one particular region.

Grain storage basket in 1992. Grain and other foods could be stored for up to five years in these baskets which were sealed on the inside and at the top with clay. Typically, the storage basket was located within a homestead's palisade to protect its valuable contents from marauding animals.

Photo by Emmanuel Kreike.

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The Nature State

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Emmanuel Kreike teaches African and environmental history at Princeton University. He studied African history at the University of Amsterdam, UCLA, and Yale University (PhD, 1996), and Tropical Forestry at the School of Environmental Sciences at Wageningen University (PhD, 2006). Recent publications related to the topic are: E. Kreike, *Deforestation and Reforestation in Namibia: The Global Consequences of Local Contradictions* (Leiden: Brill, 2010) and E. Kreike, *Environmental Infrastructure in African History: Examining the Myth of Natural Resource Management in Namibia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). His current research focuses on the socio-environmental impact of war and refugee displacement on rural societies in southern Africa during the regional liberation wars and in global comparative perspective.