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# Bearing the burdens, reaping the rewards: who benefits from Africa's national parks?

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**Kallie Szczepanski**

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Program for the Study of the African Environment

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## **Bearing the Burdens, Reaping the Rewards: Who Benefits from Africa's National Parks?**

*By Kallie Szczepanski*

It is easy to assume that European colonial governments and their post-independence successors established Africa's national parks to preserve the continent's incredible wildlife, and to set aside scenic oases of nature, protected from development. Such preservationist ideals did inform some of the decisions that went in to the foundation of places like the Serengeti and Kruger National Parks, but the various governments of East and South Africa had more complex motivations. In fact, European colonists imposed national parks on African peoples and African landscapes to fulfill Western, Romantic-era conceptions of nature and wilderness. The parks also served to concentrate and control different African communities, to deprive them of commodities such as meat, fuel, and honey (forcing them into wage labor, often for whites), and to provide tourism income to national governments.

Over the past two decades, historians, geographers, and conservationists have written a number of books exploring the dark and complex tangle of motivations behind Africa's great parks, and the long-standing injustices that continue to characterize relations between park authorities and the displaced, now park-adjacent, local communities. Some of these works are specific to a single park, nation, or region. These include *Parks and People in Postcolonial Societies: Experiences in Southern Africa*, by Maano Ramutsindela; *Land Claims and National Parks: The Makuleke Experience*, by Bertus de Villiers; and *Myth and Reality in the Rain Forest: How Conservation Strategies are Failing in West Africa*, by John F. Oates. Others take on the subject of parks and people on a continent-wide scale, such as *Social Change and Conservation: Environmental Politics and Impacts of National Parks and Protected Areas*, by Krishna Ghimire and Michel P. Pimbert; *Conservation in Africa: Peoples, Policies and Practice*, edited by David Anderson and Richard H. Grove; and *Sharing the Land: Wildlife, People and Development in Africa*, by Kudzai Makombe.

Five books stand out for their insight, fresh perspective, or in one case, quaintly anachronistic perspective. They are *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*, by Roderick P. Neumann; *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*, by Jane Carruthers; *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present*, by Jan Bender Shetler; *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation without Illusion*, by Jonathan S. Adams and Thomas O. McShane; and *Paradise Lost: A*

*History of Game Preservation in East Africa*, by Thomas P. Ofcansky. Some of the books under review are more successful than others in offering a balanced and relatively objective view, but together, these five works form a fairly complete picture of the early history and modern problems of African national parks.

In *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*, Roderick P. Neumann opens with a lengthy introduction describing the Romantic Western ideals of nature as a wilderness untouched by human hands. He points out that European colonizers in Africa saw African landscapes as primeval, a sort of preindustrial Eden, and an emblem of what Europe had sacrificed to the cause of development. Park administrators tolerated African people within game reserves only so long as they accorded with European views of “primitive” man—hunting with spears rather than guns, building traditional thatched houses, and living either as hunters or nomadic herders, but not as farmers.<sup>1</sup> Thus, park administrators at first tolerated the Maasai within the bounds of the Serengeti “as part of our fauna.”<sup>2</sup> The same reasoning applied to the so-called “pygmies” of Parc National Albert, in the Belgian Congo.<sup>3</sup> However, Neumann points out that park officials expelled from the Serengeti any Maasai who carried a gun rather than traditional weapons or used non-traditional building materials. The Maasai had to conform to European observers’ ideal of the primitive (or pristine), lest they spoil the picturesque view.<sup>4</sup>

Neumann also posits the theory that national parks in settler states, such as South Africa, the United States, and Kenya, played a key role in the formation of new national identities for European colonists.

The national identity being fought over is that of an immigrant population whose history has been left behind in the Old World and who must forge a new identity out of the conquest of nature. In this context, parks are but one aspect of the portrayal of global history as the history of Europeans, with the rest of humanity frozen in some primeval state. Hence, an important role of national parks in the construction of class and racial identity is to eliminate the record of indigenous history and culture, replacing it with a vacant landscape into which Europeans streamed.<sup>5</sup>

In North America, infectious diseases introduced from Europe wiped out as much as 90 percent of the indigenous Pre-Columbian population, so that by chance and by

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<sup>1</sup> Roderick P. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 33.

warfare, European settlers nearly realized the myth of a vacant landscape.<sup>6</sup> In Africa, however, the continued presence of thousands of vibrant and growing cultures just beyond park boundaries gives the lie to this story of vacancy.

Neumann provides a troubling but fascinating account of the expropriation of Meru traditional lands on Mount Meru in Tanzania, which formed the core of the Arusha National Park. He details the problems created by the Meru's loss of customary rights to the land (grazing, hunting, gathering, beekeeping) and their responses to this series of fundamental changes to their lifestyle. Locked out of a landscape that their agriculturalist grandparents and great-grandparents had helped to shape, the Meru engaged in acts of overt protest (petitions and letter-writing campaigns), as well as covert resistance (moving the boundary cairns of the park inward, or entering the park to gather wood or fodder while the rangers were away).

Neumann shows us a paradigm-shifting portrait of the Meru perspective on Arusha National Park: that the park encroached on them, rather than the other way around. From this perspective, the European settlers whose land claims formed the core of the park, as well as the colonial and later national governments, are seen as poachers of land, while Meru "poachers" of meat, wood, or grass are simply asserting their long established traditional rights to use the land and its resources. Conservationists have portrayed such perceptions as the result of ignorance about the importance of nature, or as the product of greed or excessive population growth. In *Imposing Wilderness*, Neumann convincingly argues that the Meru are neither ignorant nor greedy. Neumann does not, however, have an argument to counter the issue of population growth. As he himself notes, "Since 1921, population density in Akheri [central Meru] has increased from 44 to 304 persons per square kilometer in 1988."<sup>7</sup> Neumann also mentions, off-handedly, that the valuable brown olive tree, "a species highly valued as a fuel source ... is now found only in the park."<sup>8</sup> With these facts at hand, it is difficult to believe that opening up Arusha once more to unlimited local use would provide anything more than a very temporary solution to the problems of the increasingly land- and resource-poor Meru people ... and Tanzania's wildlife and rare montaine plant communities ultimately would pay the price.

South African historian Jane Carruthers, in her 1995 work, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*, expresses many of the same sympathies and concerns as does Roderick Neumann. She too challenges the myth that pits "good

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<sup>6</sup> Karl W. Butzer, "The Americas before and after 1492: An Introduction to Current Geographical Research," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82:3 (September 1992), 352.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

conservationists” against the “evil exploiters and poachers,”<sup>9</sup> and places even more emphasis than Neumann did on the wasteful hunting practices of European settlers, wildlife managers, and western tourists. Accurate estimates of the total numbers of African wildlife “bagged” by people of European descent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are difficult to ascertain, but a well-known example serves to illustrate the extent of the slaughter in southern and eastern Africa. In 1910, former president Theodore Roosevelt spent a happy ten months in East Africa shooting animals for sport and for museum collections. He “collected” some 500 individuals of more than seventy different species, including nine white rhinos—even then, a critically endangered species.<sup>10</sup> He also killed seven lions in just two days, and posed proudly for photos with his trophies.<sup>11</sup>

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we tend to view the formation of Kruger Park as one of the earliest efforts at the preservation of southern Africa’s unique ecosystems. Carruthers’s history, however, tells a rather different story. Among the motivations that actually drove colonial and later republican government policy were the protection of “game” animals (antelope, zebra, giraffe, etc.) from predators such as lions and wild dogs, so that white men could have the pleasure of shooting them. Another important motive was the denial of hunting rights to black South Africans, so that they would be forced to work for wages in white-owned homes or mines.<sup>12</sup>

Carruthers also explodes some uniquely South African legends, such as the fiction that Afrikaner President Paul Kruger was a conservationist. Although much of the impetus for the formation of Kruger National Park came from British South Africans such as R.K. Loveday and Warden James Stevenson-Hamilton, early twentieth-century white South Africans were busy forming a new national identity around the legend of the Voortrekkers. As such, park-formation advocates decided to use Kruger’s name in order to rally public opinion in favor of the park. Carruthers quotes a private letter written by Stevenson-Hamilton, in which he explains, “the ‘Kruger stunt’ is I think of priceless value to us.... I wonder what the old man, who *never in his life* thought of wild animals except as biltong [dried meat] ... what would

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan S. Adams & Thomas O. McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation without Illusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>11</sup> John Guille Millais, *Life of Frederick Courtenay Selous, D.S.O., Capt. 25<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1919), 268.

<sup>12</sup> Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park*, 91.

[he] say could he see himself depicted as the ‘*Saviour of the South African game!!!*’ [emphasis in the original].<sup>13</sup>

*The Kruger National Park* is a well-written and eye-opening work. However, Carruthers tells the story almost entirely from the point of view of the white South African administration. Although she obviously sympathizes with the indigenous Africans who were first placed under draconian controls, and then excluded altogether from the park under apartheid, Carruthers tells their stories from a distant, rather detached perspective. While Stevens-Hamilton and other white figures spring to life on the book’s pages, black South Africans appear as an undifferentiated mass called “Africans.” They do not even have ethnic or linguistic affiliations, let alone individual stories or personalities. Carruthers segregates the history of African socioeconomic and political interactions with Kruger Park into its own chapter titled “The Other Side of the Fence,” which occupies twelve of the book’s 170 pages. This is by far the greatest weakness of an otherwise interesting and useful book. Carruthers expresses a diffuse sympathy for the troubles of disenfranchised and disinherited South Africans living near Kruger National Park; Neumann, in contrast, shows us exactly what happened to the Meru when the government formed Arusha National Park, and how it has affected them over the decades.

In her work *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present*, historian Jan Bender Shetler approaches the landscape history of the Serengeti Plain through oral interviews with people from the western Serengeti region, as well as archival, ecological, and linguistic sources. She identifies “core spatial images” of the landscape from the different oral traditions of various ethnic groups in the area. The spatial images may be important rock outcroppings, springs and waterholes, or landmark trees. Each has significance as a marker of memory, often for multiple groups of people in the region. Bender Shetler maps these mnemonic sites as her informants do, but she also codes the spatial images onto satellite imagery of the area. Bender Shetler’s maps are quite interesting, showing the origin locations for each ethnic group, or the traditional sources of locally valuable commodities such as clay for pottery, white body-paint, or arrow poison. They do not, however, take advantage of the full analytic potential of remote sensing and GIS technology. For example, it should be possible to plot the most likely routes of traditional trails between these different areas, spot the sites of former settlements by changes in the compaction of soil, or trace the courses of water springs that have become clogged with debris and have run dry<sup>14</sup> in the absence of human intervention. These remote sensing and geospatial technologies make it possible to extend the study

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>14</sup> Jan Bender Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 3, 38, 131.

back in time, beyond the personal recollection of even the oldest elders, to help confirm (or deny) the details of older oral traditions.

Many of the conclusions that Bender Shetler reaches are familiar from the works of Neumann and Carruthers: the Serengeti was not an empty landscape, but well-populated; the landscape, flora, and fauna of the Serengeti were all shaped and managed by indigenous peoples for centuries before the arrival of Europeans; and European misunderstanding of these complex relationships among peoples and “natural” systems impoverished the very region that the European sought to conserve. She cites Bernhard Grzimek’s 1956 book, *No Room for Wildlife*, which argues that African landscapes such as the Serengeti have to be preserved as natural areas untainted by human presence, where the animals are so wild that they know no fear of humanity.<sup>15</sup> Bender Shetler does not point this out, but it is amusing to note that this notion, cherished by Grzimek and many other Europeans of the time, is not merely erroneous; it is exactly the opposite of the truth. In fact, African landscapes such as the Serengeti retain much of their charismatic megafauna *because* the animals recognize humans as predators; they have adapted to the threat that humans pose.

Hominids diverged from the apes and coevolved with other animals in Africa over the course of millions of years before migrating to populate Asia and Europe. During this long history of interaction, human and animal populations adapted and adjusted to one another, as humans became more technologically and socially sophisticated in their hunting behavior. In contrast, many populations of animals in regions of the world that were isolated from human contact were killed off relatively quickly after modern humans suddenly appeared on their shores.<sup>16</sup> New Zealand’s giant moa and the dodo of Mauritius were driven to extinction because they did not recognize the predatory threat of humans, and could not quickly adapt their behavior to human hunting practices.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Similar examples of human-induced (or at least human-abetted) extinctions can be found in the early history of settlement in the New World. Several different hypotheses have been developed to explain the mechanisms responsible for the post-Pleistocene extinctions documented in the fossil record. Many paleoecologists favor the “overkill hypothesis” to explain the extinction of North America’s Pleistocene megafauna—the idea that the mammoths, giant ground sloths, and short-faced bears could not adapt to the sudden appearance and sophisticated hunting strategies of the immigrant human populations from northern Asia. Contributing to this human pressure was the possibility that indigenous animals were subjected to new diseases and parasites carried by other animals that migrated across the Bering Sea land bridge from northeast Asia, as well as the warming climatic conditions that followed the end of the “ice ages,” to which these Pleistocene animals were adapted. See Paul Schultz

African peoples and African wildlife, in contrast, evolved in common ecosystems and learned to accommodate one another through the millennia. Precolonial Africa certainly was not a Garden of Eden, but humans and wildlife coexisted for millennia in a state of dynamic equilibrium.<sup>18</sup> In the late Holocene (starting ca. 4000 BP), however, climate change began an erratic but general trend to warmer, drier conditions at the same time that agricultural populations were growing in number and spreading through many parts of Africa, changing the landscape.<sup>19</sup> Sedentary agriculture results in more significant landscape transformations than does hunting and gathering. Clearing forests, woodlands, and grasslands for cultivation not only changes vegetation patterns and animal habitats, but also can alter soil development processes, erosion patterns, and surface hydrology. European colonization in the nineteenth century set in motion a series of new social and economic changes that exacerbated these trends of change and put greater pressure on the environment. With increasing European intervention came modern weaponry and the commercialization of wildlife products. These changes in land use, extractive technology, and economic behavior disrupted whatever degree of equilibrium might have existed in the systemic relationship between humans and wild animals.

Bender Shetler, however, is more concerned with the landscape as a whole and with western Serengeti peoples than with wildlife specifically. According to her calculations, evidently based primarily on linguistic drift and the somewhat timeless nature of each society's origin myth, Shetler asserts that Bantu-speaking agricultural peoples reached the Serengeti around 300–400 AD. The agriculturalists settled and eventually formed a variety of ethnic groups such as the Ngoreme, Ishenyi, Nata, Ikoma, Tatoga and Ikizu. Throughout this process of settlement and ethnogenesis, the agriculturalists formed complex social and trading networks with local pastoralist and hunter/gatherer groups. The author's glottochronological dating of this process would be more convincing if she cited archaeological evidence to support it. Over time, however, as their populations grew and their settlements expanded across the landscape, the agriculturalists forced the hunting/gathering groups from the fertile soils of the hillsides—the flat Serengeti Plain itself is too saline for irrigated

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Martin, *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 48; Eric Waltari, Eric P. Hoberg, et al., "Eastward Ho: Phylogeographical Perspectives on Colonization of Hosts and Parasites across the Beringian Nexus," *Journal of Biogeography* 34:4 (2007), 561–574.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, *Between the Sea & the Lagoon: An Eco-social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana c. 1850 to Recent Times* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>19</sup> See Françoise Gasse, "Continental palaeohydrology and palaeoclimate during the Holocene," *CR Geoscience* 337, 2005, 79–86; Fekri Hassan, "Holocene Palaeoclimates of Africa," *African Archaeological Review* 14:4 (1997), 213–230.

cropping—and set to work harnessing the area’s unpredictable rainfall and meager perennial springs.<sup>20</sup> They constructed hill-furrow irrigation systems, channeling small streams into rock-lined canals; stall-fed cattle provided manure for the hillside fields, where the farmers grew such crops as finger millet and beans.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, many of the oral traditions recorded by Bender Shetler celebrate the hunters as masters of fire, while the farmers control water.

Bender Shetler also records the disruptions caused by the arrival of European colonial powers, and the western Serengeti peoples’ responses. They used both active and passive resistance to protest German and later British colonial policies. Just as the Meru people did in the Arusha National Park, the peoples of the western Serengeti used the poaching of animals and resources from the park as a form of protest, and to assert their continued land use rights.<sup>22</sup> When German officials came to impress people as porters or day laborers, the local people would hide, melting away into the landscape.<sup>23</sup>

Just as in Arusha and Kruger, the profits from the tourist trade in the Serengeti do not flow to local people today, even though they are the ones who (involuntarily) provided the landscapes that tourists come to see.<sup>24</sup> Also like the situation at Arusha, poaching in the Serengeti has increased in recent years under the pressure of an exploding human population; Bender Shetler reports that the western boundaries of the Serengeti have seen as much as 15% annual population growth.<sup>25</sup> In addition, she explores the impact of the community conservation models that the Tanzanian government has implemented over the past two decades, with the intention of increasing local involvement in wildlife conservation. Community conservation programs aim to increase the amount of profit that local communities receive from the tourist trade, thus giving people an incentive to halt poaching. However, Bender Shetler found that the programs actually increase the amount of government meddling and control over local communities, without providing much of a financial or development benefit.<sup>26</sup> (We will return to the community conservation idea below, in the discussion of *The Myth of Wild Africa*.)

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<sup>20</sup> Bender Shetler, 50–51.

<sup>21</sup> W.M. Adams, T. Potkanski, et al., “Indigenous Farmer-Managed Irrigation in Sonjo, Tanzania,” *The Geographical Journal* 160:1 (1994), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Bender Shetler, 183.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

*Imagining Serengeti* is a fascinating look at the traditions and life experiences of the western Serengeti peoples, an under-studied group. Most narratives of the Serengeti consider only the Maasai and the Europeans as antagonists in the story, but Jan Bender Shetler provides a broader picture of the stakeholders in the Serengeti region.

Thomas P. Ofcansky's *Paradise Lost: A History of Game Preservation in East Africa* is the antithesis of Bender Shetler's *Imagining Serengeti*, in that he considers exclusively the colonial perspective and utterly neglects African ideas and experiences. It is an oddly reactionary work. Indeed, though the book was published in 2002, it could almost have been written by a colonial game management official in British Kenya in, say, 1930. (I caught myself checking and rechecking the publication date in disbelief as I read.) Rather than traveling to East Africa and speaking with local people about the issues surrounding wildlife preservation, Ofcansky relies entirely on British colonial archives for his sources, and he seems to absorb the colonial perspective completely and uncritically. He adheres to the outmoded nineteenth-century European Romantic vision of Africa as an empty Eden (see his title), and consistently portrays park-adjacent African peoples only as either poachers or the hapless victims of farm raids by wildlife. African hunting methods are cruel; African attempts in Uganda to protect their crops by shooting raiding elephants are ineffectual, and the proper solution is to have white game officials shoot the elephants instead. Ofcansky makes no mention of the colonial-era land alienation that forms a central fact of the African national parks narrative, as shown by Neumann, Carruthers, and Bender Shetler. Ofcansky uses the terms "game" and "wildlife" interchangeably, even when referring to endangered species that cannot legally be hunted. He also supports without question the idea that Africans should and must be excluded from national park lands.

Perhaps most oddly of all, Ofcansky begins his introduction with a fairly standard (modern) interpretation of the colonial European impact on wildlife. "Even before 1900, European big game hunters, using primitive firearms, had changed the face of several African, Asian, and Latin American countries by exterminating millions of wild animals for food, profit, and sport; or, more importantly, to make way for farms, settlements, towns, and cities."<sup>27</sup> Yet six pages later, at the end of the introduction, he extols the work of colonial Europeans in *preserving* African wildlife:

Although it is fashionable today to reject all forms of European imperialism, especially in Africa, a handful of colonial administrators fought valiantly against a staggering array of social, economic, political and scientific problems to preserve East Africa's wildlife. That much of the region's fauna vanished

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas P. Ofcansky, *Paradise Lost: A History of Game Preservation in East Africa* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2002), xvii.

during the colonial period while the remainder was confined in later years to artificially created reserves or national parks is as much a condemnation of human nature as it is of a political system.<sup>28</sup>

Is he excusing the European slaughter of African wildlife with a “boys-will-be-boys” shrug, here? Or worse, is he implicitly blaming Africans for it? I cannot escape the impression that Ofcansky grew up wanting to be a “great white hunter,” like Teddy Roosevelt perhaps, and that this hero-worship continues to color his approach to the history of African wildlife and parks today.

Finally, for someone who obviously is quite concerned about the fate of African wildlife, Ofcansky is not very good at identifying it. This may be a mere quibble, but the dead “bush buck” pictured on page ten is almost certainly a topi, and the “wild dog” in the photo on page seventy-six is a jackal.

*Paradise Lost* is terribly out of step with twenty-first century thinking and with all recent scholarship on the history of Africa’s national parks. However, it may have some value as a record of the colonial mindset that triggered the problems of today. That said, I would hesitate even to place it on the same shelf with *Imposing Wilderness*, *The Kruger National Park*, or *Imagining Serengeti*.

From the extreme pro-colonial and pro-preservationist stance of *Paradise Lost*, we move to the opposite pole with *The Myth of Wild Africa: Conservation without Illusion* by World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) staffers Jonathan S. Adams and Thomas O. McShane. As did Neumann, Carruthers, and Bender Shetler, Adams and McShane open their work with a critique of the western image of Africa as a wildlife paradise devoid of people. In order to remedy this wrong, they advocate turning over the parks more or less completely to local control—the exact opposite of Ofcansky’s emphasis on excluding local people as poachers and encroachers. They want to take the concept of community conservation to its most extreme extent. This, it seems, is the only way that Adams and McShane see to right the wrongs done to African land users during and after the colonial era.

In their zeal for *post facto* justice, Adams and McShane seem oddly unconcerned with the idea of internal consistency in their arguments. For example, they quite reasonably advocate local community involvement in conservation programs, as well as the sharing of profits from ecotourism and other uses of the land. They emphasize the chasm between government and local priorities, and decry top-down governmental approaches to wildlife and land management that create conflict with land- and protein-hungry local people. When it suits their argument, however, they conflate local African peoples and African governments. “Africans have more than demonstrated their interest in and understanding of the importance of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

conservation.... Even by the most demanding Western measure of commitment to conservation—the extent of national parks and other protected areas—African governments compare favorably with any in the world.”<sup>29</sup>

It certainly is true that the criminalization of subsistence hunting as “poaching” has deprived many rural Africans of a traditional source of protein, income, and social status. Many hunters have paid the price with heavy fines, jail sentences, or even their lives. Most of those caught poaching have not been organized paramilitaries bent on exterminating the elephants for their tusks—they have been local people who shot or snared an antelope for their families’ dinners. However, the authors’ advocacy of a return to precolonial hunting regimes is incredibly naïve.<sup>30</sup> While it probably is true that African people harvested wildlife at a reasonably sustainable level prior to colonization, the situation has changed substantially since that time. First, Africa’s human population in 1880 has been estimated at 120 million<sup>31</sup>; that figure stood at 922 million in 2005.<sup>32</sup> It may be “unlikely that any individual African hunter killed more than fifty animals annually,”<sup>33</sup> as Adams and McShane urge, but one does not need a calculator to predict what a devastating impact that level of hunting, conducted by today’s human population, would have on wildlife. Second, African people now have access to modern firearms; the wildlife cannot adjust to this exponential increase in human firepower. Third, total populations of wild animals are likely much lower today than they were in 1880, after the ravages of European-style big game hunting, landscape changes that have destroyed animal habitats, epizootics of introduced diseases such as rinderpest, and of wide-spread twentieth-century warfare. To argue that African hunting is harmless for wildlife, and to idealize African hunters as modern-day “noble savages” is disingenuous. Yet the authors seem to do both in their description of Malawian elephant hunter Joshua Nyirenda in Chapter 7. “The hunting methods Joshua used to bring down that elephant resemble those his great-grandfather might have used, as hunting in this part of Africa has hardly changed with time.”<sup>34</sup> Yet an heirloom firearm is still a firearm, and Mr. Nyirenda’s ability to bring down elephants single-handedly proves the efficiency of his antique gun. In Chapter 12, the authors themselves admit that such idealization is a mistake, stating that “[I]ndigenous

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan S. Adams and Thomas O. McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa* (New York: Norton and Company, 1992), 230.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–35.

<sup>31</sup> A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations, “World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision Population Database,” <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp>.

<sup>33</sup> Adams and McShane, *The Myth of Wild Africa*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

people living in “harmony” with nature are as big a myth as the portrayal of Africans and wildlife.... Given the chance, indigenous peoples will exploit their environment to their advantage using whatever technology is available.”<sup>35</sup>

In another example of whipsaw reasoning, Adams and McShane quote a student park warden in Tanzania, who says, “When I go home, and people ask me what am I doing, I hate to explain it to them. They can’t understand, except when I tell them I am a hunter. I can’t tell them I am conserving animals, because they say, why? why? why?”<sup>36</sup> This statement appears to directly refute their thesis that African people are intrinsically inclined toward conservation. Nevertheless, the authors conclude *The Myth of Wild Africa* by saying, “Africans do care about wildlife. They live with it every day.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Adams and McShane are missing the subtle but crucial difference between caring *about* wildlife and caring *for* wildlife.

All humans, everywhere in the world and in all times, use the land and its resources for their own benefit. A society’s perception of the environment is conditioned to a great extent by its subsistence strategy. A hunter of wild animals perceives the environment very differently than does a farmer or a pastoralist. The concept of “resource” is thus a relative one, as is the notion of what constitutes “good” or “bad” management of resources and the environment. It may be that in parts of eastern and southern Africa before the Bantu expansion—when most societies relied upon hunting and gathering or nomadic pastoralism rather than sedentary agriculture for subsistence—people had a greater stake in conserving wildlife. They would, at any rate, have been interested in preserving stocks of their favorite target species, and they may have noticed “trophic cascade” effects if they ever tried the experiment of eradicating some non-prey species. However, once the Bantu and Nilotic peoples arrived and dedicated themselves to agriculture and herding domesticated livestock, wildlife shifted from being an essential part of the economic base to being a potential threat to people’s livelihoods. Grazing and browsing animals destroy crops; predators take livestock while hooved animals harbor diseases that can also infect cattle or goats. For farmers and herders, wild animals may represent an occasional source of extra protein, but for the most part they are a nuisance. Under the circumstances, economic rationalism dictates that wildlife conservation would be not just a low priority, but perhaps even an unreasonable goal.

Together, the five books reviewed above provide a fairly consistent and troubling picture both of the foundation and the current state of Africa’s national parks. The parks were founded on European assumptions and ignorance of local

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 247.

conditions, and the land was essentially stolen from resident African groups. Even today, little has been done to learn indigenous African strategies for coexisting with wildlife. Park-adjacent African communities still bear the burdens of the parks, in the form of lack of land access and loss of traditional resource rights, but they see little of the profits. This is a fundamentally unjust system.

Some observers, such as Adams and McShane, advocate righting this wrong by essentially abolishing the park system and returning the land to its original owners. This could be a devastating case of correcting one problem by creating another, even worse one, however. Anyone who has driven across Kenya, Tanzania, or South Africa can attest to the fact that there are far more large animals, as well as more kinds of animals, within park bounds than there are outside the borders. We saw in the Neumann book that some valuable plants now exist only within park boundaries as well. What impact would the opening of the parks have? It is highly likely that a number of plant and animal species would vanish within decades under the pressure of modern park-adjacent human populations. Few people would advocate turning Yellowstone Park over to the ranchers of Wyoming and Montana (perhaps excepting the ranchers themselves), so why even contemplate trying this dangerous experiment in the Serengeti or Kruger?

From a policy perspective, I believe that the fundamental problem of land and resource hunger can best be tackled through clean development; the available land in many places is at or past its carrying capacity, and people need alternative ways to sustain themselves besides farming or herding. One promising field of development is in clean energy, such as solar and wind power. Just as much of the rural world skipped over land-line telephones and went directly to mobiles, so too could it leap-frog the fossil fuel economy and move straight to renewable energy sources. Why repeat the mistakes that people on other continents have made—mistakes that are already choking cities from Cairo to Nairobi to Accra in smog? Once African communities implement clean, locally-produced energy generation, they will have power to light workspaces for small-scale, artisanal manufacturing of exportable goods, refrigerating medications, powering computers, and all of the other important needs that are going unmet today. With access to global markets, health care, and a world of information, rural people in Africa will have opportunities beyond subsistence farming or pastoralism, should they want to pursue them. This could make their lives easier and more fulfilling, while easing the pressure on the land from human and wildlife demands.

Another possible source of local income, one that has been noted for decades and yet never adequately addressed, is tourism. At present, most of the profit from safari tourism goes to the foreign-owned companies that run the tours, and to the national governments that collect entrance fees at park gates. Visitors exist in a tourist bubble, driving past villages in big safari trucks and interacting only with one another.

If locally owned companies ran the safaris, and tourists sometimes rented rooms from local families rather than staying in luxury tents, the visitors would have a richer and more “real” experience, and more of the money would stay in park-adjacent communities.

From a scholarly point of view, more work should be done to examine the relationship between the current state of Africa’s ecosystems and its national parks. We are now aware that the environment (“nature”) is not static like a painting or photograph, captured and frozen for all time. The environment is complex and dynamic, an ever-changing system of interrelated components and events. National parks are a symptom of the static view of the environment. Parks, by their very nature, attempt to halt or control processes of environmental change. Parks often try to preserve an idealized picture of what society thinks the environment *should* be like, and in many cases present an un-natural version of “nature.” Can such parks be considered a valid use of land? What is their true purpose? All of the parks spotlighted in the books reviewed in this paper grew out of Africa’s colonial experience; the policies enforced, not only by colonial governments themselves, but also by post-independence national governments, developed out of the romantic, western misconceptions that Neumann so ably explicated. What would Serengeti, Meru, or Kruger look like without direct European intervention? It is impossible to say. In fact, any attempt to recapture a “lost” Africa, free of European influence, may just be another manifestation of the very romantic and static thinking addressed above.

Ethiopia is one African state that was never colonized, but did establish national parks of its own. Up to this point, western academics have done very little work on the history of Ethiopia’s national parks. This dearth of research is probably due in part to the fact that the governmental records in the archives in Addis Ababa are all written in Amharic, rather than a more convenient European colonial language. Ethiopia’s parks also lack the international cache of Kruger or Serengeti. Yet they could prove an important counterexample, a chance to investigate the processes of national park establishment and administration in Africa minus the complicating factor of colonialism. The questions raised are varied and fascinating: Did the process of land set-asides play out in the same way when Ethiopia’s emperor gave the order, rather than a European colonial government? Did local people react in the same way to the loss of access to land and resources? Were the park boundaries flouted as at Meru, or did park-adjacent people in Ethiopia more readily accept the government’s decrees?

Even beyond these policy and academic suggestions, however, more should be done to bridge the centuries-old gap in understandings of the environment between people in the western world and those in Africa. It is impossible to wipe the slate clean, on any continent, and return to a pre-industrial world. Yet we do have the communications capacity to meet in the middle, if we are willing. As a start,

westerners could gain some empathy for the dangers and annoyances that Africans face from their picturesque wildlife. The same suburban squire who looks into buying a gun or explosives when a squirrel raids his bird-feeder for seeds would likely expect an African farmer to put up with elephants, zebras or hippos consuming his crops and his livelihood, rather than see those exotic creatures destroyed. If the world's wealthy Discovery Channel and BBC Nature-watchers are going to demand such a sacrifice from subsistence farmers, at the very least we should be willing to show the same tolerance for our own wildlife, from squirrels to wolves and mountain lions. Americans, Europeans and Asians should welcome our own resurgent populations of bears, wolves, deer, and other large animals, and learn to coexist with them.

Africa's best-known national parks were born out of European imperialist ideas. Nonetheless, they serve an important purpose. We should strive to distribute both the rewards and the burdens of maintaining Africa's parks more fairly. If the parks disappear, many unique species of plants and animals could well become extinct. We would all be poorer for it.

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