



Averting the White Gaze: How a Black Panther in Laikipia Came to Symbolise the Absurdity in the Conservation World

By Mordecai Ogada



In early February 2019, local and international media were awash with the story of how an American photographer named Will Burrard-Lucas had captured breathtaking photographs of the first black leopard seen in Africa in over 100 years. Reaction came in thick and fast on social media. It began in wonderment at the beauty of the creature, the quality of the photographs and the apparent magnitude of the achievement. This so-called discovery was further elevated when it got endorsed and parroted by the venerable *National Geographic* magazine.

For an individual who has been in the field of conservation for nearly two decades, the critical opprobrium generated was fascinating. The proposition began with a few of the uninformed questioning whether black leopards really exist, followed by consternation that nobody had ever seen this animal in a century and puzzlement over how a foreign photographer had the requisite knowledge to find and photograph the animal living in our midst.

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conversation and the racial undertones that accompanied the “discovery” of the black leopard. After a lot of thought and conversations, I came to the realisation that the ground is beginning to shift, and conservation will have to change a lot sooner than many people expected.

As the news of the findings made the media rounds, the protestations rose to a crescendo, with the informed rightly questioning the arrogance of the photographer making such a claim. These were accompanied by photos of black leopards taken in the area in the last few years, including one photographed in Ol Ari Nyiro conservancy in May 2007 and another photographed in Ol Jogi conservancy in August 2013.

The most powerful rebuttal, however, came from the NALOLOO blog written by John Kisimir, a veteran journalist, that shed light on the hitherto unmentioned field assistant, Ambrose Letoluai, who works with a San Diego Zoo research project in the area and who knew of this animal, saw it, and photographed it, long before showing Will Burrard-Lucas where to set his camera traps for the best shot. Ambrose correctly states that their research team (which includes both locals and foreigners) has sighted and photographed this animal several times over the last year, and it's unacceptable for their work to be slighted in this manner.

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Noble white hunters and explorers

My training is in carnivore ecology and I have been involved in conservation research and policy work for 20 years now. Those aware of my writings and lectures on racial prejudice know my position on these matters, but nonetheless I was intrigued by the events around this single species discovery. In a backhanded manner, Will Burrard-Lucas' hubris and *National Geographic's* inability to escape its “white explorer” origins inadvertently created awareness of an injustice and prejudice that was hidden in plain sight in our society for generations. It is worth stating here that “Geographical Societies” in the West are by and large bodies that were formed by wealthy people to fund and facilitate the white explorers' voyages of “discovery” and plunder in the Global South. They are the ones who defied the likes of Henry Morton Stanley and others of his ilk.

In recent years, I have dedicated time and energy in advocacy, trying to get this message across to an oblivious society that is blissfully unaware of the seamy underbelly of the conservation world. Therefore, the spectacle of sudden enlightenment among the Kenyan public was a moment that defies description. The story of the first black leopard photographed in “over 100 years” advanced the understanding of the depth of our societal oppression and an appreciation of the sheer magnitude of our challenge across space and time.

Our colonial history class taught us about European explorers, such as David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, James Augustus Grant, Pierre Paul de Brazza and Samuel Teleki, who came to Africa to explore the “Dark Continent” that we call our home. The education we received in school implied that these were brave souls in search of adventure. As a young student, I remember being intensely curious about the “why” question. Why did they come? Why here? Why for so long? Why the risk?

These explorers were coming to spread influence and political power, to plunder resources and to spread Christianity. The personal glory and self-gratification accrued after random acts of cruelty and arrogance was generally just a bonus that came with the territory. Besides the church and their home governments, these explorers brought great prestige to institutions like the Royal Geographical Society, which quickly became venues for enthralling talks of their adventures and repositories of specimens collected and artefacts looted from the lands being “explored”.

The consensus in conservation biology is that for anything to exist in Africa, it has to be discovered by a Caucasian. This isn't a new phenomenon; since colonial days, lakes, mountains, rivers, valleys and even wild animals have been “discovered” and named by people from Europe. It is never questioned, just accepted. For those who think that these are relics banished to ancient history, we only need to look at the names around us. Restricting ourselves to the conservation sector, we see the names Grant's gazelle (*Gazella granti*) and DeBrazza's monkey (*Cercopithecus neglectus*) named after James Augustus Grant and Pierre Paul de Brazza, respectively. The Grevy's zebra (*Equus grevyi*) was named after Jules Grevy, the president of France between 1879 and 1887.

Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, there was increased conservation activity in Britain's East African colonies (the term “conservation” being used very loosely in this instance). This prominently involved the declaration of national park ordinances in Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda in 1945, 1948, and 1952, respectively. National parks were crucial instruments in the dislocation of Africans from selected areas and the creation of nature spaces for recreation by European settlers by expressly demarcating areas where no person (read: native) was allowed to enter. What escaped all but the most perceptive of historians is that the flurry of creation of national parks and other conservation structures that followed these ordinances was a sphere of influence that was designed to withstand the African independence wave that followed shortly thereafter.

These parks also provided a useful and relatively harmless employment opportunity to demobilised British soldiers with no skills other than shooting. Indeed, an examination of colonial game wardens' reports from the mid-20th century reveals wardens with military backgrounds without exception. This set the stage for African wildlife conservation practice as a domain of white men with guns - a situation that has stood the test of time and which is becoming an anachronism that has survived the passing decades of decolonisation.

This position of dominion captured the imagination of Hollywood, and was celebrated in “noble white hunter” movies, notably *Mogambo* (shot in Kenya in 1953), *Hatari* (shot in Tanganyika in 1962) and *Born Free* (shot in Kenya in 1966), which featured George Adamson, the last relic of the military age who was killed by bandits in Kora in 1988. The latter years of the 20th century also saw the advent of the noble “white saviour” in the form of *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* (1984), and the “classic” *Out of Africa* (1985) starring Robert Redford and Meryl Streep.

The ranger mentality

The paradigm that we inherited (and still ignorantly embrace) firmly places a black man exclusively in the position of a ranger. In this context, “ranger” describes a non-intellectual participant in conservation who enforces policies created for the benefit of other people in other places, often to the detriment of locals. Within this fallacy resides the mentality that ties conservation values and heritage to their attractiveness to tourists. The most obvious manifestation of this in Kenya is the existence of a Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife. In countries where heritage is regarded for its intrinsic value to its citizens, it is placed under the ministry of interior (security) or under natural resources.

This weakness is recognised by NGOs and their foreign supporters who seek to supplant the Kenya

Wildlife Service (KWS) in the policy arena while almost exclusively restricting their support to operational materials and equipment. Like all other long-held beliefs, the ranger position is one that has numerous adherents who have invested significantly in it, resulting in a systemic malaise. The long drawn-out struggle to recruit a substantive Director-General at KWS has taken strange turns, with repeated advertisements and re-advertisements interspersed with long interludes of silence.

The minister's proposal seemed extreme given that poaching figures in Kenya currently stand at 69 elephants last year out of a population of 34,000 (an attrition rate of 0.2%) and 9 rhinos out of a population of approximately 1,000 (an attrition rate of 0.9%). The latter number is even lower than the 12 rhinos that were lost at the hands of KWS itself in a botched translocation exercise in July 2018.

Two recent events in the policy arena have revealed the systemic challenges that arise from the "ranger mentality" that pervades our statutory conservation authority. The first was an ill-advised attempt to re-introduce consumptive use of various wildlife species as game meat to be served in restaurants, kowtowing to a cabal of tourism investors that want to re-introduce sport hunting in Kenya. This was a case where the tourism industry asked for conservation policy to be changed to serve their purposes. If this question was approached from a conservation perspective, one would have questioned the feasibility of serving game meat in restaurants while prosecuting (and occasionally shooting) suspected poachers.

As expected, this initiative ran into strong headwinds, and seems to have been aborted without the task force having submitted their report following several months of discussions and "public engagements". This was an attempt by the "rangers" to change the law to satisfy external interests at the expense of locals.

The second starkest and potentially most tragic example was the recent declaration by the Minister of Tourism and Wildlife that Kenya is going to [fast track legislation](#) to introduce the death penalty for poachers, proudly announced exclusively in foreign news outlets. As expected, there were choruses of praise coming from NGOs and "conservationists" all over the world at this "significant step" taken by Kenya to save wildlife.

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Moreover, there is the well-known fact that Kenya has not carried out the death penalty since the hanging of the 1982 coup plotters, Hezekiah Ochuka and Pancras Oteyo Okumu, in 1987 for treason, so there is no chance that a death sentence can be carried out on a killer of a wild animal. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine what purpose this legislative move would have served, other than the ranger state seeking to please the perceived owners of our wildlife narrative.

When Save the Elephants reported (also in 2016) that a lone bull elephant had "bravely" entered Somalia after 20 years, BBC (again) parroted the same news with much fanfare. Nobody thought to question how they deduced that this elephant is the only one that had crossed into Somalia, or that it had last visited that country 20 years ago.

It is worth repeating that the most robust aspect of this perception of ourselves as rangers is the manner in which our citizens and institutions have all internalised it. KWS staff at all levels are regularly taken for security training, including high-level courses at the National Defence College. Yet they are law enforcers, not military personnel. I stand to be corrected but I am unaware of KWS staff ever being taken for conservation philosophy and ethics training at a similar level. The most likely reason for this is the lack of resources because our policy weakness and “operational” thinking doesn’t accommodate this. Our usual big NGO donors certainly wouldn’t fund it because a “thinking” KWS might wake up to the fact that they are killing and supplanting it. As we learned from the colonialists, black people in conservation in Africa are not supposed to think. They are the porters, rangers, trackers (and poachers). The unseen and unheard black man is not just a factor of photography, a subjective art form from which we can easily be deleted using Photoshop or movie editing software; it spills over into science as well, which is supposed to be objective observation.

In my carnivore ecology experience, I have come across what was described (by the BBC, no less) as a the “discovery” of a population of 100 lions in the Alatash region of Ethiopia in February 2016 by a group of scientists led by Dr. Hans Bauer of Oxford University’s wild carnivore research unit. One single lion’s roar can be heard across several kilometers. These were 100 lions. Ethiopia is a nation of around 90 million people. It stands to reason that some Ethiopian would have heard or seen the lions, their tracks or the remains of their kills.

When Save the Elephants reported (also in 2016) that a lone bull elephant had “bravely” entered Somalia after 20 years, BBC (again) parroted the same news with much fanfare. Nobody thought to question how they deduced that this elephant is the only one that had crossed into Somalia, or that it had last visited that country 20 years ago. It is accepted as true because it is reported by a white man in Africa. This is such a coarse and primitive premise that has been eliminated from most thinking and human endeavour in Africa, but still persists in conservation.

The real poachers

Our profession exists in a realm where the message is simple: All African wildlife is in peril and the source of the threat is black people. Just to be clear, this is not an aspect of citizenship, but race. There are hundreds of thousands of Africans of Caucasian extraction who routinely indulge in “hunting”, “culling”, “cropping” and other euphemisms for killing of wildlife, but however often they kill wildlife outside legal structures, the odious term “poacher” is never used in Africa in reference to anyone who isn’t black skinned. This is no accident - it is the existence of African conservation practice in a twilight zone where reality seeks to follow perception, rather than the logical reverse.

A fairly stark reminder of this is the way in which meat from wild animals is referred to as “bushmeat” when eaten by local black people, and called “game meat” or “venison” when eaten in upper-class circles dominated by foreign tourists. The most shocking thing to most people whenever I share this example is not the depth of this obvious prejudice, but the way in which societies all over the world (including ourselves) have come to accept it as the norm. This norm, in a nutshell, is the greatest challenge to conservation in Kenya, not poachers, not human populations, not law enforcement, or smuggling. My experience in the realm of wildlife management in Kenya has been largely in the arena of carnivore conservation and I have witnessed several instances of race-based, bare-faced entitlement to destroy our national heritage.

Three incidents come to mind. The first was a “conservationist” (sanctioned by KWS) carrying carcasses of cows into the Aberdare National Park in the year 2000 and hanging them on a tree, patiently waiting and shooting every single lion that came to eat the meat. I was the unseen and unheard black man who was an MSc student collecting tissue samples from the killed lions for research. I am not sure how many lions were eventually killed because I only survived one night. (A

“normal” African man not suffering from bloodlust may have lasted longer.) It is a crying shame that this man served on the board of KWS until last year, and is currently the CEO of the largest wildlife conservancy in southern Kenya.

The second incident was years later, in 2009, when as a member of the KWS carnivore management committee, we fielded a request from another “conservationist” to shoot 50% of the hyenas in the Aberdare National Park because “they are killing too many young rhinos and buffalo”. I was taken aback by the temerity of the request, and I was glad that the revulsion that I and other committee members expressed carried the day.

The third incident happened in 2012 when as a member of the same committee, we fielded a request from another world-famous “conservationist” to kill lions in his private wildlife conservancy because he felt that they were killing too many Grevy’s zebra foals. Again, we rejected this request, but it never stops.

One thread was uniform across all these requests - they came from white men who are considered leaders in conservation, and all have sat on the Board of Trustees of Kenya Wildlife Service. Would KWS countenance such hubris from a black Kenyan? Is there any possibility that the recent ill-advised request to hunt wildlife to serve game meat in restaurants came from a black Kenyan? I think not.

To an observer from outside the profession, the difficult conundrum in which conservation finds itself would look like a situation we should be struggling to free ourselves from. However, there are factors that we must consider. The status quo has been in place for so long that there is a large contingent of local professionals who have learned how to negotiate it and find themselves very comfortable positions therein. These are positions and assignments that are well-remunerated and highly regarded without the burden of formulating, justifying or adjusting policy as necessary. This entails sitting in an office, travelling to attend (not give presentations at) conferences, being the “Áfrican face” wherever one is needed and appending signatures wherever and whenever one is needed by the foreign interests that really do hold the reins to our conservation sector.

In return for this, there is a lot of “discretionary” funding, business class travel, and handsome per diem allowances, not to mention slaps on the back and being referred to as a “good chap”, “fundi” or a “switched on” fellow. (Incidentally, the latter term is one strictly reserved for black people. It is a backhanded compliment that implies the subject is a relatively intelligent and active member of a largely indolent population.)

Under the current atmosphere, is it really a surprise that KWS was unable to recruit a substantive Director-General nearly two years after the resignation of the previous holder of the office whose qualifications were in banking? The most recent move by the Board of Trustees was to lower the qualifications required in the advertisement initially put out in November 2018. This wasn’t surprising either, because the intellectual weakness in our conservation sector still desperately wanted a ranger, not a leader at the helm of KWS.

We live in an imperfect world, and it is rife with injustices in almost every field, but the visceral reactions to *The Big Conservation Lie* continue to confound me even two years after its publication because of how *illogical* some of them are. I cannot speak to my co-author’s experiences, but I’ve had a few bizarre interactions with readers attempting to police my outrage...

On 13th March 2019, the weak intellectual core succumbed once again and a senior officer from the Kenya Navy, Brigadier John Waweru, was appointed Director-General of KWS by executive order. With due respect to him, it will take a while before a navy officer comes to grips with the challenges facing our conservation sector.

'Why are you people so angry?'

I wouldn't be so confident as to claim any cause-and-effect relation, but since the publication of *The Big Conservation Lie*, there have been questions raised in various quarters about the millions of dollars perpetually being sunk into the conservation "industry" and the returns on investment (or lack thereof). This book, which I co-authored with John Mbaria, has understandably elicited very strong reactions because of its content.

We live in an imperfect world, and it is rife with injustices in almost every field, but the visceral reactions to *The Big Conservation Lie* continue to confound me even two years after its publication because of how *illogical* some of them are. I cannot speak to my co-author's experiences, but I've had a few bizarre interactions with readers attempting to police my outrage, mostly in the realm of "I understand that there are governance challenges, prejudice, and corruption in the conservation sector, but why are you people so *angry*?" Others would opine that everything said in the book is true, but for some reason would take issue with the pointed way in which we said it. The truth about these comments has only recently dawned on me - that it is normal to point out and have opinions on conservation policy challenges in Africa if you are white but not if you are black. Even if what you are saying makes perfect sense and is already in the public domain, the colour of your skin makes it unacceptable.

I have previously embarked on a mission to find writings (articles, books, chapters, etc.) by black Kenyan conservationists on the injustices and prejudices bedeviling the sector. There are none, and I would be delighted to be proved wrong on this. With all our high qualifications and senior-sounding positions, we are content to be rangers awaiting instructions on the destiny of our own heritage.

Many of us mistakenly think that we are safe, but we are not. When 12 rhinos died in a botched translocation exercise in 2018, a number of senior and highly-qualified black "rangers" paid a heavy price for their part in an exercise that was solely based on a World Wildlife Fund power trip dubbed the "Kenya Black Rhino Action Plan" and not on government wildlife policy.

We are beginning to experience a paradigm shift, and there is a growing realisation that this whole conservation thing is really about us, and not about those who come to see what we have conserved. It showed up in the immediate response to the claims of the Laikipia leopard sighting being the "first in 100 years" and the backtracking from the photographer.

This new thinking is especially true amongst the younger conservationists because, sadly, most of those above the age of 40 have been irretrievably defiled by the conservation establishment. However, the rest of us are enjoying something of a "perfect storm" with unrelated things occurring together to accelerate change. It is a story that is still fluid and happening. As a writer though, I appreciate the poetic justice of it all - how the arrogance of a white man claiming to have discovered a black panther in Kenya proved to be the trigger that woke up our sleeping masses.

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