



A DARK TRUTH: The racist dynamic at the heart of Kenya's conservation practices and policies

By Mordecai Ogada



The practice of conservation and the narrative around African wildlife is a kingdom, albeit without a single monarch. The monarchy and nobility consist of an eclectic mix of royalty, commoners, idlers, misfits, scientists, killers (who refer to themselves as “hunters”) across a very broad spectrum of backgrounds. We have youthful cowboys in their 20s, and we have octogenarians. There are also wealthy lords and scruffy backpackers. The one thread that links them is the fact that they are all white.

Their race is also what confers upon them a unity of purpose and mutual sympathy in lands where the indigenous majority are black. This kingdom is absolute and doesn't tolerate dissent from its subjects. Those who serve the kingdom faithfully are rewarded with senior positions in the technical (not policy) arena and international awards and are showered with praise and backhanded compliments in descriptions like “being switched on”, “a good chap”, and best of all, “a reformed poacher”. This praise also manifests itself in the form of the Tusk Conservation Award, which is conferred annually by the Duke of Cambridge, HRH Prince William, on the local conservationist who best serves as an implementer or enforcer of the kingdom's conservation goals.

[Structured conservation practice](#) in East Africa began largely when demobilised World War II soldiers started looking for a field where they could apply one of the few skills they had gained in the war (shooting) without harming people. The rise of the conservation officer or protector was actually preceded by the establishment of the first hunting reserves at the turn of the century a few decades earlier.

However, there was a new recognition that the resource was finite and needed to be preserved for the exclusive use of the colonial nobility that was necessarily defined by race; hence the need for enforcement. [Exploitation of African wildlife](#) by Western consumers began in the early 1900s with hunting safaris, which were basically tests of resilience and skill with the target of harvesting the biggest and largest number from this bounty under pretty harsh and rustic conditions. It was closely followed in the 1960s by the photographic safari and cinematography that cemented the romanticism of these adventures in the African wild. This led to a spurt in tourist interest, which no doubt pleased the foreign exchange-hungry newly independent states.

Intellectual desert

Two major pitfalls arose from the romantic age between 1950 and 1970 - pitfalls that continue to determine how wildlife conservation is practised today. The first major pitfall was the illogical link and valuation of wildlife based on tourists' appreciation and (where hunting was allowed) consumption. The second pitfall was the firm placement of black Africans as "props" who were destined never to be equal intellectual participants in the management of and discourse around African wildlife. Thus my compulsion to describe Kenya (rather harshly, in some of my readers' estimation) as an "intellectual desert" as far as wildlife conservation is concerned.

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Indeed, photographic and hunting safaris have since then included a very obvious but unspoken element of domination over black Africans - we can see it in the nameless black faces in white hunters' photographs and in the postures of servile African staff attending to white tourists in the advertising brochures. Black Africans are totally absent as clients in all the media and advertising materials and campaigns. When hunting was legal in Kenya, it was normal for a photograph of a hunter with his guides, porters and gun bearer to be captioned: "Major F. Foggybottom and a fine leopard bagged in the Maasai Mara region of Kenya, September, 1936." Fast forward 80 years or so. Black Africans are prominent in their absence from the reams and hours of literature and footage on Africa's spectacular wildlife. The uniformity of this anomaly is startling across the board, whether one is watching the Discovery channel, BBC, or National Geographic.

With the advance of neoliberalism, market forces have become important drivers of both tacit and explicit policies all over the world. In African conservation policy and practice, the black African has become like an insidious impurity that sometimes leaks into the final product but should ideally be absent in anything considered "premium". This is not to say that media houses and marketing firms are deliberately engaging in racial discrimination; however, they are, sadly, pandering to prejudices that have been cultivated by romantic or colonial notions about Africa and its wildlife.

The colour bar

Blatant racism becomes much more evident in the conservation field, which in Kenya is dominated by whites. From a strictly academic standpoint, the open discrimination and obvious colour bar evident in the conservation sector in Kenya is fascinating for two major reasons: one is its longevity – business, agriculture, banking, education and all other fields have changed beyond recognition in the last few decades, but conservation remains firmly in the “Victorian gamekeeper” mode, where conservation is basically about protecting wildlife from the proletariat so that the nobles can consume the same for luxury/ recreational purposes.

The second is the acceptance of this status quo by senior indigenous state officials and technical experts across the board. Wildlife conservation is the one field where highly-qualified black Africans are routinely supervised by white practitioners of far lesser technical pedigree or experience. Indeed, some of the supervisors are American or Europeans relatively new to Kenya and with very rudimentary knowledge (if any) of Kenyan wildlife and ecosystems. Examples that come to mind are the appointment of one [Peter Hetz](#) (MSc, American) as Executive Director of the Laikipia Wildlife Forum in 2011 to supervise one Mordecai Ogada (PhD, Kenyan) who was appointed as Deputy Director. The recent appointment of [Mr. Jochen Zeitz](#) to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) board is another case in point. Here I have used very pointed racial references because it is quite simply a racial divide. We simply do not find non-Caucasian foreigners in wildlife leadership positions in Kenya, nor do we find Latin Americans or Asians. We also don't find Kenyans of European descent in any of the subordinate roles.

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How, an observer might ask, is this hierarchy maintained without any disruption by the growing number of indigenous Kenyans pursuing advanced studies in the conservation field? How do the academic exertions of all these technicians fail to moisten the intellectual desert in Kenyan conservation?

One reason is because, just like water never produces vegetation on seedless ground, the intellectual barrenness of indigenous Kenyans has been built into the training facilities and curricula. It goes without saying that Kenya's ecological diversity and abundant wildlife are key pillars in the country's economic, social and cultural identity, but Moi University, the *de facto* leading local institution in this field, only offers a degree course in “wildlife management”, which basically equips local wildlife practitioners to be technicians or foot soldiers for conservation, not to be fully engaged with any of the intellectual challenges that exist in the sector. Those who are better trained and experienced in this field are a small minority who seldom find acceptance in the sector because they inherently threaten the existing hierarchy.

KWS itself has two training facilities: the Manyani field school and a well-resourced training institute in [Naivasha](#). [Manyani](#) is a proven centre of excellence in tactical field training necessary for wildlife rangers. The [Naivasha training institute](#), which was established in 1985 to develop the “soft skills” and policy thinking around conservation and fisheries, changed in 2009 when it began offering rudimentary naturalist and paraecologist courses more geared towards serving the tourism industry than the cause of conservation. As one would expect, the academic contribution of this institution to tourism falls so short of the standards required by Kenya's highly developed tourism industry that in

the final analysis, it is a lost investment. One of its more recent distinctions is the levels of academic performance advertised on its [website](#) as requirements for admission, which are far below what an institution training custodians of any country's most valuable resource should be.

Closer analysis of these institutions and their low intellectual ceilings reveals a far subtler, but important, perspective on the colour bar in Kenyan conservation. The people being trained in these institutions are replacing the gun bearers and gamekeepers of feudal England and colonial Kenya.

Kenya as a nation still struggles with this colour bar and our public arena is replete with the symptoms of it. One that stands out is the dropping of charges against the [late Tom Cholmondeley](#) for the killing of Samson Ole Sisina, a KWS officer, at the scene of an industrial bushmeat harvesting and processing operation on the former's Soysambu ranch. Those familiar with Kenyan society know that the killing of a security officer on duty is a (judicial or extrajudicial) death sentence in Kenya 99.99% of the time. The truth is that there were absolutely no mitigating circumstances here, other than the victim's race. Barely a year later, in May 2006, Cholmondeley shot and killed Robert Njoya, a stonemason who lived in a village that borders his 50,000-acre estate, a crime for which he was jailed in 2009 following public uproar.

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More recently, in January 2018, there was a memorial service for the [late Gilfrid Powys](#), a renowned rancher, conservationist, and KWS honorary warden. The service was attended by a plethora of top brass from KWS in full uniform, as well as several government leaders, as befitted his status in society. I suspect many in the congregation were taken aback when one of the eulogisers, Mr. Willy Potgieter, read a long and touching tribute where he detailed how the departed wasn't a particularly religious man but would indulge his spirituality by hunting buffalo every Sunday morning. The discomfiture of the uniformed staff and company gathered was palpable and would have been amusing had it not been such a stark testament to the existence of conservation apartheid in our country and our society's acceptance thereof.

Sanitised terminology

Apartheid in conservation matters. The duplicity that exists within many people and institutions purported to be dedicated to conservation may seem bizarre to those unfamiliar with the sector. Here is how it works: Basic psychological examination of wildlife hunting reveals that it is a uniquely complex aspect of human endeavour because it occurs at both ends of the spectrum of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Subsistence hunting is firmly at the bottom of the hierarchy as it fulfils physiological needs while sport hunting is at the top, within the realm of self-actualisation. This is illustrated by the celebrated blood sports of falconry and fox hunting pursued by royalty in the Middle East and Britain, respectively.

The highly sanitised terminology is also in striking contrast to the derogatory terms like "bushmeat poaching" used in reference to subsistence hunting. This highlights the role of the media in cultivating the racial divide because in Africa the term "poacher" or "bushmeat" is never applied to the activities or diets of people of European descent, regardless of legality.

Likewise, the term "hunter" is never applied to the activities of black people. These three degrees of separation in the hierarchy of needs are the basis of the colour bar. They are the reasons behind the

flawed belief that we can allow white people to kill (not poach) wildlife and shoot black people suspected of being “poachers”. This is also the basis of the ongoing nonsensical scheme of a “task force” going around Kenya trying to gather support for proposed “consumptive use” of wildlife, an activity *de facto* delineated by race. It stands to even casual examination that the practice of structured legal hunting of wildlife in Kenya (and much of Africa) is an activity controlled by, and indulged in, by people of Caucasian extraction.

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It also goes without saying that the colour bar we live with in Kenyan conservation is an anachronism that we should have escaped from in the mid-20th century. But before we can achieve that freedom, we must squarely face up to the problem and appreciate its full extent. It is systemic.

When the board chairmanship of KWS fell vacant about four years ago, our government turned, almost reflexively, to the ageing Dr Richard Leakey, who is no longer at his physical or intellectual best, and who, in my view, is not even the best candidate for the job. The spectacular failure, frantic inactivity, and deafening silence on conservation issues that characterised Dr Leakey’s last tenure at KWS came as no surprise to those of us familiar with the man’s capabilities. The most poignant memory of this is a [photo](#) of Leakey posing with the black board members holding tusks beside him – an image that evoked memories of the “great white hunter” of yore. The photo itself was taken during the torching of 105 tonnes of ivory in 2016, a fairly logical conservation activity, but the carefully structured pose shows a board composed of people who have no knowledge or reading of the history and culture around wildlife conservation in Kenya. If they had even rudimentary knowledge of the history of conservation practice in Kenya, they would have recognised that their photo was misplaced in space and time. There is little doubt that Leakey (and possibly Brian Heath, in the back left, distancing himself from the ivory) were aware of this nuance and were the only intellectual participants in this photo – and therein lies a snapshot of our enduring tragedy.

The intellectual desert that is Kenya’s conservation sector remains as barren as ever in 2018. The sporadic and disjointed efforts to moisten it with sprinklers will all come to nought unless we concurrently plant the seeds of indigenous knowledge and expertise.

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