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BEYOND THE WHITE RHINO

Confronting the South African land question

The enfranchisement of today's voteless millions, who have been economically and politically marginalised for many years, holds exciting possibilities for the environmental movement.

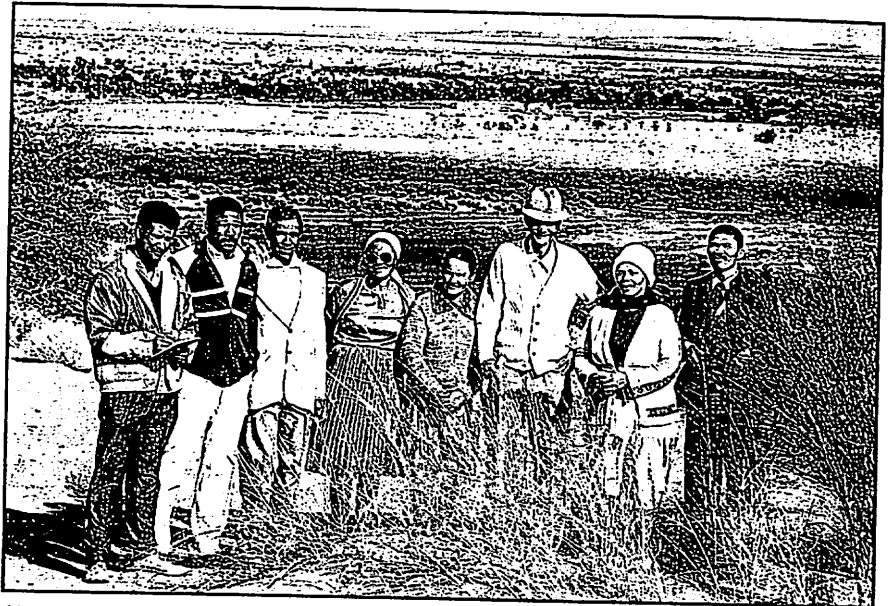
by Farieda Khan

TRANSVAAL MUSEUM

I had much sympathy for many of the squatters who were victims of forces which they did not understand ... It was a sad, serious and complex question, but my duty was clear. I had to try to save the last white rhino habitat from being overrun by human beings and their stock.

Ian Player, 1972.

The unfolding of history has left a particularly deep impression in the sphere of environmental perception and attitude, with the result that South Africans are today still struggling to come to terms with some of the harsher consequences of actions thoughtlessly undertaken in the past. The socio-economic consequences of conflicts over land, one of the most enduring features of the South African historical landscape, have reverberated down to the present — with particularly negative effects on black environmental attitudes.



Members of the Mier Residents' Association who oppose the Mier Rural Areas Bill./Lede van die Mier Inwonersvereniging wat gekant is teen die Mier Plattelandse Wetsontwerp.

photo/foto: The Argus

urged that the land hunger of black South Africans be understood and accepted as a relevant factor within the environmental context. Generally speaking, however, it cannot be said that environmentalists recognise the political basis of environmental issues or that they fully grasp the implications that the democratisation of South Africa holds for the future of the environmental movement.

In fits and starts, South Africa is slowly but inexorably moving through a period of transition which will hopefully result in the establishment of a democratic society. The enfranchisement of today's voteless millions, who have been economically and politically marginalised by decades of apartheid, holds exciting possibilities for the environmental movement. In a society which no longer physically alienates its citizens through discriminatory land legislation, or spiritually estranges them through

denying them access to natural and recreational amenities, non-government organisations (N.G.O.s) finally have the chance to implement strategies which will result in a membership composition which is broadly representative of South African society. The establishment of a participatory democracy, however, also has serious implications for the way in which state departments and N.G.O.s (The Wildlife Society of Southern Africa included) have dealt with land conflicts in the past.

In interviews with the Western Cape representatives of the ANC, the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo), the New Unity Movement (NUM), the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA), the land question emerged as the biggest stumbling block to the implementation of environmental literacy. Discriminatory land legisla-

The land issue is indivisible from environmental issues, and its bitter, divisive legacy dates from the first war between the Khoi and the colonists in 1659, through the many wars of conquest and dispossession in the ensuing centuries, down to the Group Areas harassment still taking place today. The implications of this ongoing conflict should neither be discounted nor underestimated when considering the polarised environmental attitudes of black and white South Africans. This unresolved conflict manifests itself in the refusal of mass democratic organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), to accept the current land dispensation.

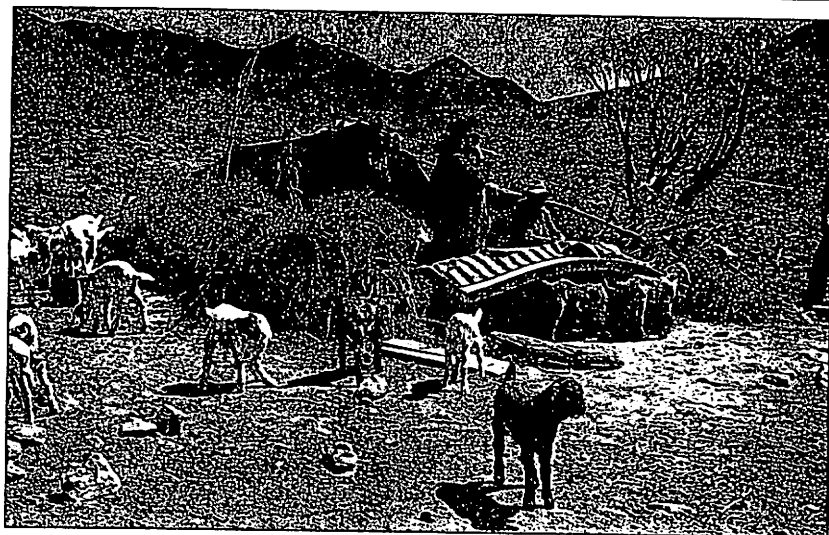
There have been many environmentalists in the past, such as Creina Bond and John Hanks, who have acknowledged the centrality of the land issue to conservation and have

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tion such as the 1913 Native Land Act (which made it illegal for Africans to own land in designated white areas, except in the Cape) and the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act (which scheduled just 13 per cent of the land in South Africa for African occupation), may be seen as examples of the type of legislation which, interviewees charged, has not only made black South Africans feel like aliens in the land of their birth, but has also badly distorted environmental attitudes. It was felt that unless and until the South African environmental movement began to confront the harsh realities of the land question, it would remain an insuperable obstacle in the path of future co-operation between mass democratic organisations and N.G.O.s.

Several representatives also raised the legacy of mistrust and suspicion left by a tradition of imposed conservation measures. In this regard, the story of the creation of game and nature reserves is often the story of the dispossession and forced removal of blacks. Well documented cases include the removal of the Tonga people from the Ndumu Game Reserve, which was created in 1924, as well as the loss of traditional grazing land to the Forestry Department by the Fingo people of the Keiskamma Hoek area in 1923. More recent removals include those sanctioned by the KwaZulu government in order to proclaim the Tembe Elephant Park in 1983 and the Kosi Bay Nature Reserve in 1988. Local inhabitants have complained of land loss, forced removals and consequent material loss, severe social dislocation, as well as being barred from access to the natural resources necessary for their survival. Local residents have also complained of lack of consultation and of exclusion from the planning process. As a result, there is substantial opposition to the KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources in Maputaland (AFRA, 1990).

The Wildlife Society is currently also involved in a "land versus conservation" dispute. More than a thousand homeless people have settled in the protected Dukuduku State Forest on the western side of Lake St. Lucia. The Society has expressed its concern, being of the opinion that the loss of the forest would be tantamount to a "national tragedy" (*African Wildlife*, Vol. 44 No. 3, p.178). Furthermore, the Wildlife Society has approached the Minister of Environment Affairs, who has taken steps to charge and evict "the culprits". As a solution, the Society has proposed the purchase



A goatherd and his family photographed near Basterfontein. These hardy, nomadic, Nama-speaking people are constantly on the move in search of grazing for their stock. 'n Bokwagter en sy familie naby Basterfontein afgeneem. Hierdie geharde, nomadiese Nama-sprekende mense bly gedurig aan die beweeg op soek na weiding vir hulle vee.

photo/foto: Graham Williamson

of white-owned farms by the State and "resettling these people as soon as possible". This "solution" which, in the classic South African mould, does not appear to incorporate a consideration of the relevant historico-political factors, or consultation with the people affected, opts for forced removal, in the guise of "resettlement".

Anthony Bannister and Fred Bridgland (1990) have pointed out that, in the outcry over the St. Lucia dune-mining, the tragic history of dispossession and forced removal of the Zulu people has been overlooked. For centuries the eastern shores of Lake St. Lucia were inhabited by pastoralists, who were then forced out for strategic reasons when, first a weapons-testing base, then a missile-testing range were established in the area. Unsurprisingly, whites living much closer to the missile range were not removed. While it has been pointed out that only a few of the families who have recently settled in the Dukuduku Forest have an ancestral claim to be there, the basic facts of dispossession and forced removal remain unaltered and unaddressed in the present land conflict.

Another flashpoint which is particularly pertinent in this context, is the Mier land tenure battle, in which the ANC has become involved. Under the Mier Rural Areas Bill, which was passed by the House of Representatives on 13 June 1990, the management committee of the remote Mier area in the Kalahari (a "coloured" reserve) will be allowed to sell off land held in trust for the

community. This move towards the privatisation of land held in trust since 1883, has been vigorously resisted by many local inhabitants who, being mainly stock farmers, fear that it would deprive the majority of grazing rights, thus forcing them to leave the area. The fight of the Mier Residents' Association to retain their communal grazing rights in the face of claims of environmental degradation, has been supported by the UDF, certain civic bodies, the Surplus People Project, as well as by Nelson Mandela (Deputy President of the ANC), who has twice intervened on their behalf. The Mier Bill has been signed by the State President, but the Residents' Association has vowed to continue the fight.

The Mier Bill holds serious implications for the residents of similar reserves such as Leliefontein and the Richtersveld. Leliefontein was the scene of a similar land dispute, with charges of overgrazing and environmental degradation being levelled against the system of communal land tenure. The residents were, however, able to successfully challenge the privatisation of communal land in the Supreme Court. The State had been unable to prove that it was the communal system of land tenure that was at fault, since existing regulations controlling overgrazing had never even been applied (Seale, 1988).

The Richtersveld has been a bone of contention for several years as officials struggled to reach a compromise between conservation objectives and the pastoral way of life

of the Nama inhabitants. The original solution to the conflict between the nomadic stock farmers and the National Parks Board, who wanted to establish a national park in the area, envisaged forced removals and resettlement. It was only after a restraining order was handed down in the Cape Town Supreme Court that the parties involved began negotiations. A compromise has now been reached, which enables local farmers to remain on the land, albeit with safeguards aimed at protecting fragile areas (*African Wildlife*, Vol. 44 No. 1). In addition, the proposed Richtersveld National Park will be jointly administered by representatives of all parties concerned.

This historic agreement has not only been hailed by environmentalists as a triumph for negotiation but has also been cited by a UDF official as a positive example of the participation of local inhabitants in land disputes (pers comm, 1990). It is a pity, however, that the procedure of consultation at grassroots level was a last resort, forced on the planning authorities after a Supreme Court

interdict. Nevertheless, the Richtersveld compromise holds hope for a successful and satisfactory resolution for the people of Mier and the Dukuduku forest. Granted, the issues are complex and further encroachment by people poses a real danger to South Africa's fast diminishing tracts of unspoilt land. But, posed against this threat, is the even greater danger of reinforcing the negative conservation attitudes of many black South Africans, who often perceive conservationists as placing the threats to endangered species and pristine habitats above the welfare of human beings.

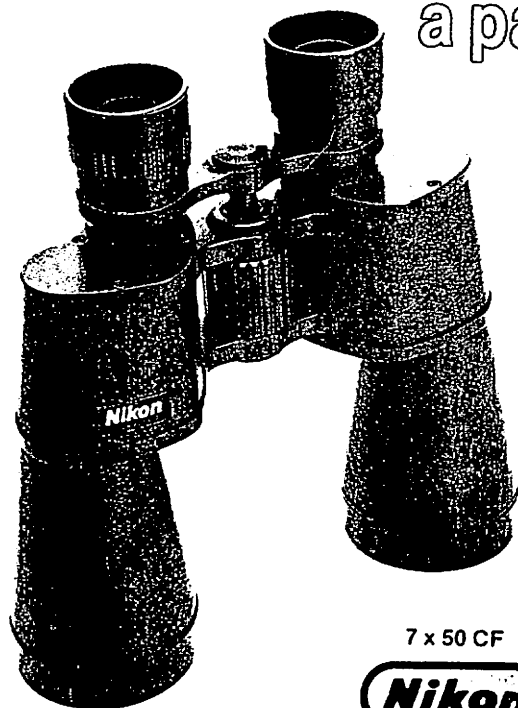
In treating rural blacks who have been dispossessed or who farm communally as problems to be "removed" or "resettled", environmentalists continue to exploit the "privilege versus powerlessness" divide that has characterised the South African environmental paradigm since the nineteenth century. What then, should be done? Firstly, it must be acknowledged that environmentalists cannot resolve the land question — this remains the realm of the politicians in partner-

ship with all South Africans. However, it is the responsibility of environmentalists to confront the land issue honestly. By recognising the relevance of historico-political factors in understanding present day land disputes and by considering these factors when devising participatory strategies to resolve such disputes, the foundation of a far more sensitive and informed approach will be laid. In this regard, valuable lessons can be learnt from the experiences of colonial and post-colonial Africa.

The mistakes of countries such as Kenya, where Masai pastoralists were, and still are, being subjected to harassment and accused of being environmentally destructive, are of great potential benefit to South Africa as examples of practices to be avoided.

Secondly, and most importantly, it must be accepted that the issue of land-use versus conservation is not solely an ecological issue but also, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "a question of social justice" (pers comm, 1989). Envi-

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romentalists, particularly those involved at official planning and implementation levels, are well placed to deal with traditional land-use conflicts as the sensitive socio-political issues these in fact are. By taking into account the needs and rights of previously ignored communities, environmentalists will be contributing to the construction of a new South African environmental paradigm — one with a much needed democratic foundation.

This country's long and unhappy history of land conflict, dispossession and forced removal has created a festering resentment among black South Africans who have been further alienated by decades of insensitive environmental policies. It is time that the South African environmental movement unequivocally demonstrated that, on its scale of values, the provision of human habitation is *at least* equal to the preservation of the habitat of the white rhino. ■

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The Wildlife Society's point of view

The Society believes that there will be occasions when people may have to be moved for the sake of creating new land-use activities. This does not only refer to creating new nature reserves or national parks. It could also be for legitimate reasons like the building of new towns, villages, airports, roads, railway lines, dams, mines, etc.

Where, however, there is a real need to move people, the Wildlife Society has always held the view that such people should be adequately compensated for the inconvenience of having to move. In the case of most white people, compensation is usually in the form of monetary payments. Under such circumstances the white is able to re-establish himself in a new place of his choice. In the case of a black person having to move, however, the position is a lot different and more difficult. Firstly, where does he move to? In the new area does he have room for his chickens, cattle, goats, sheep, etc.? Is there adequate water within reasonable reach? Can he grow some food crops? These are important considerations for a black man in a rural or peri-urban situation. Monetary compensation for a black man is totally inappropriate as he cannot just go and purchase a new farm or house wherever he pleases.

In discussions that the Wildlife Society has had with

many black people in South Africa, it has been stated time and time again that when blacks have been moved to make way for new land-uses they have been worse off in their new area than they were before being moved. This is bad enough when the reasons for moving are legitimate but it is totally unacceptable when it is for reasons such as enforcing "apartheid" (removal of "black spots", etc.). In the case of removals for land-uses such as conservation areas, recreation areas or agricultural areas, people affected should be moved to better living sites than those they had before. Also, these new living sites should cater for their real needs such as grazing lands, good quality water, land for crops, etc. If these cannot be provided there will be considerable resentment among the people so affected. This is, in fact, what has happened in many parts of Natal where the establishment of new conservation areas has resulted in the displaced people being worse off in their new areas. (See "box" on page 325.) ■

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