

SELW 1914

Africa's Greatest Hunter

*The Lost Writings
of Frederick C. Selous*

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Chapter Eight

The ravages of the tsetse fly and its fatal impact on domestic animals were long a source of fascination to Selous. Here is the printed version, first published in the Journal of the African Society (volume 8, January 1909, pages 113-29), of an address he presented to the members of that learned body. In it, he turns from the more commonly discussed issue of livestock to that of the interaction between the tsetse fly and big game. The focus of his remarks is on whether or not the tsetse fly is dependent on big game for its survival.

BIG GAME IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS RELATION TO THE TSETSE FLY

One of the earliest entries in the diary of Van Riebeeck, the first Dutch governor of the Cape, reads as follows: "This night the lions roared as if they would take the fort by storm." This note was made in the middle of the seventeenth century, and I think it more than probable that if on the night in question some six thousand listeners had been placed at intervals of a mile apart, throughout the whole length of Africa, from Cape Agulhas to the very shores of the Mediterranean Sea, every one of them might have recorded the fact that he also had heard lions roaring. For at that time almost the whole of Africa must have teemed with wild animals, and wherever in Africa wild animals are to be found in any number, there lions will be heard roaring at night.

In the present paper I shall make no attempt to deal with the question as to the relationship between big game and one or other or all of the various species of tsetse flies found throughout Africa, but shall confine my remarks entirely to the question

few Dutch farmers, who preserved here and there on their farms a few isolated herds of white-tailed gnu, blesbok, and bontebok, all these three species of African animals would long ere this have shared the same fate as the quagga and the blaubok. As it is, the blesbok is now a rapidly increasing species, and many herds exist on different farms in the Orange and Transvaal Colonies, and also in British Bechuanaland. There are not many white-tailed gnus, but they are increasing in numbers, and the species will in all probability be preserved. Of bontebok, some two or three hundred are being carefully preserved on two enclosed farms in their original habitat near Cape Agulhas, and I understand that they are not decreasing in numbers. The magnificently horned kudu, by many looked upon as the finest antelope in the world, has too of late years become very plentiful in certain districts of the Cape Colony, owing to the protection afforded it by the more enlightened farmers.

Although between the years 1860 and 1870 an enormous destruction had taken place amongst the great herds of game inhabiting the open plains of South Africa, all the greater game, such as elephant, rhinoceros, buffalo, giraffe, as well as many of the handsomest species of African antelope, were still plentiful up to the latter date, in the low bushveld of the eastern Transvaal, in the coast belt of Zululand and Amatongaland, and throughout all the forest-clad country extending from the Limpopo to the Zambezi.

In the early seventies of the last century, however, natives commenced to flock from every corner of South Africa to the lately discovered diamond fields. I doubt if any one of them returned to his kraal without a gun or rifle and a supply of ammunition, for at that time in order, I think, to attract labour, natives were allowed to buy arms and ammunition in any quantity they liked on the diamond fields, in spite of the repeated

protests of the governments of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. This general arming of the natives of South Africa in the early seventies of the last century, was not only largely responsible for the native rebellion in the Cape Colony in 1878, and the war with the Basutos two years later, but in my opinion was also the principal cause of the destruction of big game throughout all the native territories beyond the Limpopo. Once the natives possessed guns, they always managed to obtain ammunition either from English or Portuguese traders.

Take the case of Amatongaland: The late Mr. William Charles Baldwin has recorded how in 1854, when hunting near the junction of the Pongolo and Usutu Rivers, he found elephant, rhinoceros of both the black and the white species, buffalo, and many other varieties of game excessively plentiful throughout that district. Since Baldwin's time very few white men have ever visited this part of the country, as the climate is very unhealthy for Europeans. In 1896 when I went to the very spot where Baldwin had met with game of all kinds in very large numbers forty-two years earlier, I found wild animals almost nonexistent. This was with the exception of nyala, which were still numerous in the dense jungles between the Pongolo and Usutu Rivers. The native Amatonga, armed with guns and rifles bought on the diamond fields or at Delagoa Bay, are almost entirely responsible for the destruction of all the game in this part of South Africa.

Although with the exception of the blaubok and the true quagga, no other species of wild game is absolutely extinct in Africa south of the Zambezi. I fear that the white rhinoceros, which still survive in Zululand and Mashonaland, are so few in number that the days of this most interesting animal—the largest terrestrial mammal after the elephant—are numbered as an existing species in South Africa. The black rhinoceros, too, once so