

Animal Keepers' Forum



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WAR ON WILDLIFE

by
Robert Berghaier
Philadelphia Zoo

In 1977, Hammond Innes' book *The Big Footprints* was published. This novel is about the aftermath of war in East Africa sometime in the future. This fictional conflict involves the nations of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in a war of East African unification. The end result of the fighting is the complete destruction of the area's famous wildlife sanctuaries. The Serengeti's vast herds are ruthlessly machine-gunned by the combatants. The Ngorongoro crater is turned into a cattle ranch. Mount Kenya, The Aberdare and the Samburu reserves become farmlands. This fictitious account is, to say the least, depressing reading for anyone interested in wildlife conservation. Certainly the plot is not so unbelievable if one considers recent incidents in East Africa.

Toward the end of 1978, Idi Amin's troops invaded Tanzania, starting a war which lasted until May, 1979. Amin was finally deposed and his reign of terror ended. Now it was the wildlife of Uganda which would suffer.

The first disaster took place at Kabalega Falls National Park (one of three Ugandan parks). Amin's troops, cut off from the rest of Uganda, destroyed thousands of animals for meat, skins and ivory. A news correspondent reported that during his three day stay at the park he saw only one giraffe, one buffalo and several small groups of antelopes. The pre-war population of the park was 50,000 head of game.

A second disaster was soon to follow. Early in August, American biologist Karl Van Orsdol reported the destruction of one third of the wildlife in Rwenzori National Park by Tanzanian troops occupying the area. Van Orsdol was studying the park's lions for a doctoral dissertation, but so many were killed it became impossible for him to continue. The chief warden of the park protested the massacre of wild life. The Tanzanian troops were ordered back to their barracks, but they have so far refused. The warden feels the soldiers' refusal was due to Government instability.

With Kabalega Falls already destroyed, Rwenzori's destruction means the death of a tourist industry which had been lucrative for Uganda before Amin's reign. Innes' book has partially come true. The results of war in East Africa has devastated two of the world's unparalleled wildlife sanctuaries.

Similar incidents occurred during the post independence era of the Congo. Many parks were caught in the fighting. At one park, twenty-three game rangers were killed trying to protect its' wildlife. In the Sudan, the Northern White Rhino population was destroyed during a civil war in the sixties. Rebel troops traded rhino horn and ivory for weapons. The story is the same in Angola, Somalia and other areas in Africa where fighting has taken place.

Some would say that such actions are typical of underdeveloped countries cultures which do not value animal life. Few are aware of the examples of "Western Civilization" in Africa. During the 1941 British drive on Italian-held Abyssinia, British and South African troops blazed away from their vehicles slaughtering thousands of animals and leaving the

War on Wildlife, continued

carcasses to rot. Some believe the populations of game in such an arid area have never fully recovered. During World War I, wildlife was severely depleted by German and British troops in what is now Eastern Tanzania.

Unfortunately, Africa's wildlife is not alone. The last wild herds of European Bison were destroyed in Poland by fighting during World War I. The much admired Israeli Army violated their country's game laws by decimating gazelle herds in the Negev desert while on maneuvers. The United States has its own recent examples during the Indochina War. Elephants, wild or domestic, were considered military targets and were napalmed on several occasions.

I have heard some first-hand accounts of the effects of the Vietnamese War animals. While working in the Philadelphia Zoo's lion house, I happened to have an interesting conversation with a Vietnam Veteran. I had mentioned to him that one of the reasons the Siberian Tiger is considered endangered is because its prime habitat, the Amur River Valley, is an area of heavy military activity between the Chinese and Russian armies. I remarked that men with guns tend to use them. He then told me that his unit killed every monkey or ape they came across, because they were told that these animals would attack man. Another veteran related how he saw water buffalo used as targets to test grenade launchers.

War and instability are great threats to the survival of many endangered species, especially large mammals. In an area of military conflict, with a breakdown in Central Government, or with groups of bored soldiers, wildlife will lose, regardless of who is tending the triggers. This seems to occur no matter how strong a nation's wildlife laws are or how well run a park system is. Uganda was at one time a leader in third world conservation.

The next wildlife tragedy may well take place in Iran. Under the Shah, Iran had strong game laws and a model National Parks system protecting the endangered Onager, Asian Cheetah and Persian Fallow Deer. I have yet to hear how they have survived the change in power.

It seems that human nature cannot, or will not, change. Conflict always seems to be taking place somewhere in the world. So, the wildlife of the world must be placed alongside women, children, the elderly and other innocent victims of war.

REFERENCES

The Tree Where Man was Born, Peter Matthiessen
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Philadelphia Inquirer, Articles from Associated Press, March and August 1979.

The National Wildlife Federation has opened two "natural resource" clinics in Colorado and Oregon to train future lawyers and wildlife professionals in ways to solve wildlife and environmental problems.

The Colorado clinic is headquartered at the University of Colorado School of Law in Boulder and the Oregon clinic is headquartered at the Oregon School of Law in Eugene.

The skull of an adult gray wolf *Canis lupus* was identified in Wisconsin--the first confirmed specimen in 20 years.