

Godzilla versus King Kong -- East African style

A new battle rages over the remaining wildlife in the savannahs of East Africa – only this time not over such mundane topics as the ivory trade or poaching. At stake is the very soul of conservation itself – control over national conservation policies.

The *ancient regime* of international conservation organisations in Africa, such as the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), Conservation International (CCI) and their ilk had, just like the colonialists of past eras, divided Africa up into spheres of influence. Respecting each others' territorial boundaries they largely refrained from overt interference, and when territory was relinquished from one to another it was done with great decorum.

But suddenly these cosy arrangements have been abruptly shattered by new, brash upstarts paying not even lip service to the *status quo* and intent on capturing all the high ground there is to be had. Spearheaded by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the animal welfare lobby is riding roughshod across these previously elysian fields.

The immediate prize is Kenya which, along with India, shares the dubious distinction of banning all wildlife hunting of any kind.

70% of all Kenya's wildlife has vanished since the ban on hunting and all consumptive use of wildlife way back in 1977. Wildlife photo-tourism occupies only 5% of Kenya's wildlife areas outside the National Parks so on the rest of the rangelands there are no economic returns of any sort to be had from wildlife. Many conservationists now consider that only the reintroduction of ranching, cropping, trading and hunting can recreate the essential economic incentives to make it worthwhile once again for landowners to maintain and invest in the wildlife on their land. Without such new incentives the continued loss of wildlife is inevitable.

The international animal welfare lobby is reacting vociferously against any move to reintroduce hunting in any form back into Kenya. Working through wholly sponsored, local animal rights pressure groups, they have mounted a ruthlessly efficient publicity campaign in newspapers, radio, and television, cleverly playing the race card by arguing that the only beneficiaries would be rich, white landowners who had anyway stolen their land (and the wildlife on it) from Africans.

Concentrating their efforts on the institutionally weak and financially strapped Kenya Wildlife Service, IFAW has poured in funds for budget support, "salary incentives" and high profile projects – such as the \$3.5m recently spent on moving some 300 elephant from the lush, coastal forests of the Shimba Hills National Park to their near certain death in the arid wastelands of Tsavo East National Park.

The opening skirmish was in late 2005 when the Kenyan parliament passed some much needed amendments to the existing Wildlife Act. But following "spontaneous" street demonstrations and some highly misleading lobbying and briefings of MPs, Ministers and even the President himself, it was never signed off into law.

But battle was really joined during the 2006/07 national review of wildlife policy. The government appointed a National Steering Committee and a policy drafting team and views were sought throughout the country in a series of national and regional seminars. But the entire process was hijacked by the animal welfare lobby who literally shipped in paid, rent-

a-mob crowds and reduced everything to an endlessly sterile shouting match about the reintroduction of sport hunting.

But it went even further than this, for an unholy alliance of local animal welfare and land reform groups, in a move eerily similar to the extremist pro-life groups in the USA, resolved that were wildlife hunting to be reintroduced into Kenya then they would arm bands of local militias to shoot to death the hunters in the field.

And in a final irony, once the policy review process was completed the Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife sidelined their own drafting team and turned instead to a single IFAW consultant to draft the new Wildlife Act. Now before cabinet, the draft panders solely to entrenching the power of the animal welfare lobby while having little to do with the genuine conservation problems facing Kenya. Kenya's wildlife are indeed poorly served by this new Act.

But now here is the rub – how come that the *ancient regime* of conservation organisations, who had so actively supported for years the consumptive use of wildlife and sport hunting as valid and effective conservation tools, so meekly surrendered to the animal welfare lobby? They made no concerted effort whatsoever to counter their propaganda or argue against their irrational conservation policies, and made only token gestures against the Draft Wildlife Act once it was published.

It cannot be that they experienced a sudden change of heart for they still support, as a cornerstone of conservation, consumptive utilisation of wildlife elsewhere in Africa. So clearly their decision had nothing whatsoever to do with effective conservation in Kenya.

These not-for-profit organisations are not necessarily the knights in shining armour they would wish us to believe, for just like commercial companies they compete fiercely against each other for critical market share of donor funds, of philanthropic funds and for the donations of the millions of the well meaning among us. And like the current motley crop of wannabe presidential candidates in the USA, these NGOs must appear always to be squeaky clean.

Seen from this perspective, the behaviour of the *ancient regime* so placidly to relinquish their property rights to Kenya's wildlife in favour of the animal welfare lobby can be seen as a rational and essentially economic decision.

For the animal welfare lobby possessed what Saddam Hussein clearly did not – a weapon of mass destruction: for had any of these mainstream conservation NGOs volubly and openly challenged the welfare lobby, and put up the matching funds needed to resist them, they would have been quickly labelled as supporters of "... shooting animals for fun...". Like being labelled a paedophile, this is the kiss of death in the conservation environment from which there is no return.

So is all lost in Kenya? ... for the wildlife that is, not for those wretched conservation organisations who have sat so idly by while 70% of all Kenya's wildlife vanished from under their very noses. Probably so, for under the draft Wildlife Act Kenya's remaining wildlife will simply continue to fade away. The animal welfare lobby has no interest whatsoever in conservation – only in using their "success" in Kenya to attract more members and raise more money.

A plague on all their houses.

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