



Conservation in Malawi—Old and New

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When the white man came to Nyasaland—now Malawi—the country teemed with wildlife. The next hundred years saw a fivefold increase in the human population and an immense depletion of the wild animals. Today, although protected only in the five national parks and three game sanctuaries, the wildlife is again increasing, and the main tasks are to develop the reserves and educate the young especially to value them.

It is customary to lay the blame for the pathetic deterioration in the numbers of all species of wild animals in Malawi over the last hundred years or so at the door of the indigenous inhabitants, but it is, I suggest, very doubtful if this accusation will stand up to a careful analysis of the evidence.

When Livingstone first visited Malawi in 1859 he recorded that the country was teeming with wild animals, the Shire River full of hippo, the flood plain around Chiromo full of elephant, and herds of buffalo and various species of antelope all along his line of march. For the next fifty years or more Dr Livingstone's statements on the wildlife situation were borne out by every writer who makes any mention of wild animals. If the indigenous inhabitants are to blame for the enormous decrease in numbers since the arrival of the Europeans, how was it that the country was teeming with game when they first arrived?

We know that the tribes hunted 'game', and that some of their methods were excessively wasteful. In periodic 'drives' large numbers of animals of all sorts were surrounded and driven into nets or into pits furnished with upright sharpened stakes. Worse still they were frequently driven over the edges of steep-sided ravines when only the lucky ones broke their necks at the first fall; the rest lay with broken limbs while others rained down on top of them; only when the drive was completed were the maimed put out of their misery with club or spear. Another abominably cruel method of hunting was to surround a herd with fire at the height of the dry season; many animals must have been roasted alive before the hunters could get at them. The peoples of Africa had been living with the game and hunting it by such methods for hundreds of years prior to the coming of the Europeans, yet in 1859 there was still an ample sufficiency.

The obvious answer of course, is that it was not the actual destruction of the animals so much as the destruction of their habitats which caused their depletion. Since 1859 the human population of Malawi must have increased at least five or six times with the consequent increased demand for garden land; this could have had but one effect on the wild animals, especially the larger antelopes, buffalo and elephant. With the increase in cultivation not only was there a great constriction of the area available to the wild animals but there were also the cultivators' demands for the destruction of the animals themselves when these encroached on their garden lands. It could be argued that all this would have taken place without the intervention of the Europeans, though this is doubtful. In 1859 the indigenous population of Malawi was being decimated by the depredations of the slavers from the east coast; thousands of able-bodied men and women were captured and carted off to slave markets year after year; but the people left behind were largely the old or unfit, and the destruction of villages and village land must have been beyond their capacity to repair. The Europeans brought law and order to Malawi and, together with the medical facilities they made available to the people, were directly responsible for the population explosion which has taken place in recent years. Added to this is the fact that the Arab slave traders introduced firearms into Malawi in considerable numbers and the British introduced a great many more. So it is not to be wondered at that the survival of wildlife in the territory became extremely precarious.

Effective Tribal Conservation

The apparent miracle of the survival of Africa's magnificent fauna before the advent of the white man was probably no miracle at all; it is much more likely that the people themselves, or their more enlightened leaders, evolved conservation methods which, because they were accepted and adopted willingly by the tribes, were far more effective than any modern wildlife protection ordinance could ever be. The great 'game drives' which were so shockingly wasteful of wildlife probably only took place at long intervals, and the professional hunting fraternity or guilds were very much 'closed shops', which would take good care that their means of livelihood were not jeopardised; moreover permission to hunt had to be obtained from the local chief. The number of professional hunters was limited by the inheritance of hunting magic, which was thought to be passed on in the male line, and the possession of this magic was indispensable both to the safety of the hunter and to his success in the hunt. There is a very strong belief in the mystical power of an animal to harm (*chirope*), quite apart from its physical power, and this belief is almost universal throughout Africa. A wounded or dying animal can affect the hunter who is not adequately protected by special techniques and medicines. These secrets were passed through certain lineages, and without such protection the hunter was in danger of being affected by a type of madness akin to rabies; the belief might well have originated with that dread disease. The avenging force has little to do with the physical power of the animal

in life and, small as it is, the duiker is a more potent avenger than the elephant, which is why the horns of a duiker are preferred by herbalists as medicine containers. On the other hand the eland is credited with having the highest amount of avenging power.

Another factor which militated against the excessive slaughter of wild animals was the custom of totemism in certain tribes. Where this was accepted every man had a clan name apart from his individual name and if the clan name was that of an animal then no-one in the clan was allowed to kill or eat that animal or make use of its skin for clothing etc. This type of prohibition was found in the Mohammedan Yaos of Mangochi district who are forbidden by their religion to eat the flesh of pigs, with the result that, in the early 1930s, their district was full of bush-pig and warthog.

There were, and I hope still are, strong beliefs about the limitation of the number of animals which may be killed in any one place at any one time. The Rev. T. Cullen-Young tells of the belief in a great snake supposed to inhabit the Kaulime pool on the Nyika plateau, a 'spirit' that looked upon the animals of the plateau as being his and only permitted one to be killed at one time. After Cullen-Young had shot two bull eland one day in 1913 his hunter remarked, 'You will not shoot an eland again; the spirit is angry if more than one of his oxen is killed'. Despite many chances and some incredible misses, Cullen-Young did not succeed in killing another eland for twelve years! He refers to the spirit of the Kaulime pool as a 'curse' but I should have thought that the punishment he suffered fitted the crime—a large bull eland weighs about 1500 lb!

There is an absolute prohibition on the hunting or killing of animals within a sacred forest, that is those forests which serve as graveyards of chiefs, which harbour shrines or which are considered for any reason to be the preserves of spirits. Dr Schoffeleers tells me that he has the names of fourteen such places in the Lower River districts alone and also has recent records of poachers being severely punished by the ritual authorities at M'bona's shrine.

No Fear of the Wildlife

The myth, so often related, that the people lived in a state of fear of wild animals and so would not move about freely does not stand up to the evidence. If they were unable to move freely it was because of human brigands not animals—except in a few isolated cases of a rogue elephant or man-eating lions or leopards, and any of these could happen today. Two instances from personal experience confirm this—Late one evening in 1932 I was motor-cycling towards Mangochi along the newly-made Balaka-Mangochi road, in those days thickly wooded and devoid of villages for long stretches, when a large lioness crossed the road just ahead of me. Shortly after this I met an elderly woman walking, so I stopped and warned her that there was a lion in the vicinity. The old lady thanked me but, despite the fact that she was alone and night was drawing on, still continued on her way. Thinking that she could not have understood what I had said, I called after her and repeated my warning whereupon she replied that she had quite understood thank you but 'so what?'

Those may not have been her actual words but that was most certainly her meaning. A lion had crossed the road, well why shouldn't it? It wouldn't do her any harm and, so far as I ever knew, it didn't. The other case involved the killing of an elderly woman by an elephant in her garden at Liwonde because she took liberties once too often, but the operative phrase is 'once too often'. It turned out that the elephant had for a long time been making a nuisance of himself by stomping about in the gardens. This intrepid old lady, far from being terrified of her massive adversary, had been in the habit of shooing him away as if he were a cow or a herd of goats. On this occasion, however, she was actually seen to give the elephant a resounding crack with her hoe, and the elephant obviously considered this to be going too far.

Advent of the British

In 1891 when the British declared a Protectorate over what was then Nyasaland, the Consul General, H. H. Johnston, very quickly realised that the old order was changing and that the once prolific wildlife would dwindle away unless steps were taken to protect it. Regulations for the preservation of wild game in certain parts of the Protectorate were published on September 9, 1896, to be repealed and fresh ones substituted—the Game Regulations, 1897—a year later. These specified two game reserves—the Elephant Marsh and the Lake Chilwa Reserves—the former including the whole of the Elephant Marsh, on the west side of the Shire River above Chiromo, and an area of the Thyolo escarpment as far as the Zoa falls on the Ruo River, the latter covering a large area of the Palombwe Plain and the southern half of Lake Chilwa. When the 1897 Regulations were replaced in 1902 only the Elephant Marsh was mentioned, and this in turn was deproclaimed in the Game Ordinance, 1911, when the Central Angoniland Reserve, which included large areas of the Dedza and Lilongwe districts, was mentioned for the first time. All these early Game Ordinances mention in one schedule or another, giraffe—which most probably have not existed in Malawi for centuries—chevrotain, another doubtful inhabitant, and white-tailed gnu. Sixteen years later, in the Game Ordinance, 1927, the Central Angoniland Reserve was still the only reserve in Nyasaland. But by 1946, when a Game and Forest Reserves Commission was set up to report on the value and suitability of all game and forest reserves, the Central Angoniland Reserve had been deproclaimed and no fewer than eight new reserves had been gazetted. These were:

Southern Province: **Tangadzi Stream Reserve**, gazetted in 1928, 9 sq. m.; **Lengwe Reserve**, 1928, some 50 sq. m.; **Chidiamperi Reserve**, 1930, an island of about one square mile in Lake Chilwa, the object being to preserve pythons.

Central Province: **Kasungu Reserve**, 1930, 800 sq. m.; **Nkhotakota Reserve**, 1938, 339 sq. m.; **Ngara/Nabtundu Reserve**, 1940, 19 sq. m.

Northern Province: **Vipya Reserve**, 1938, 50 sq. m.; **Kazuni Lake Reserve**, 1941, 79 sq. m.

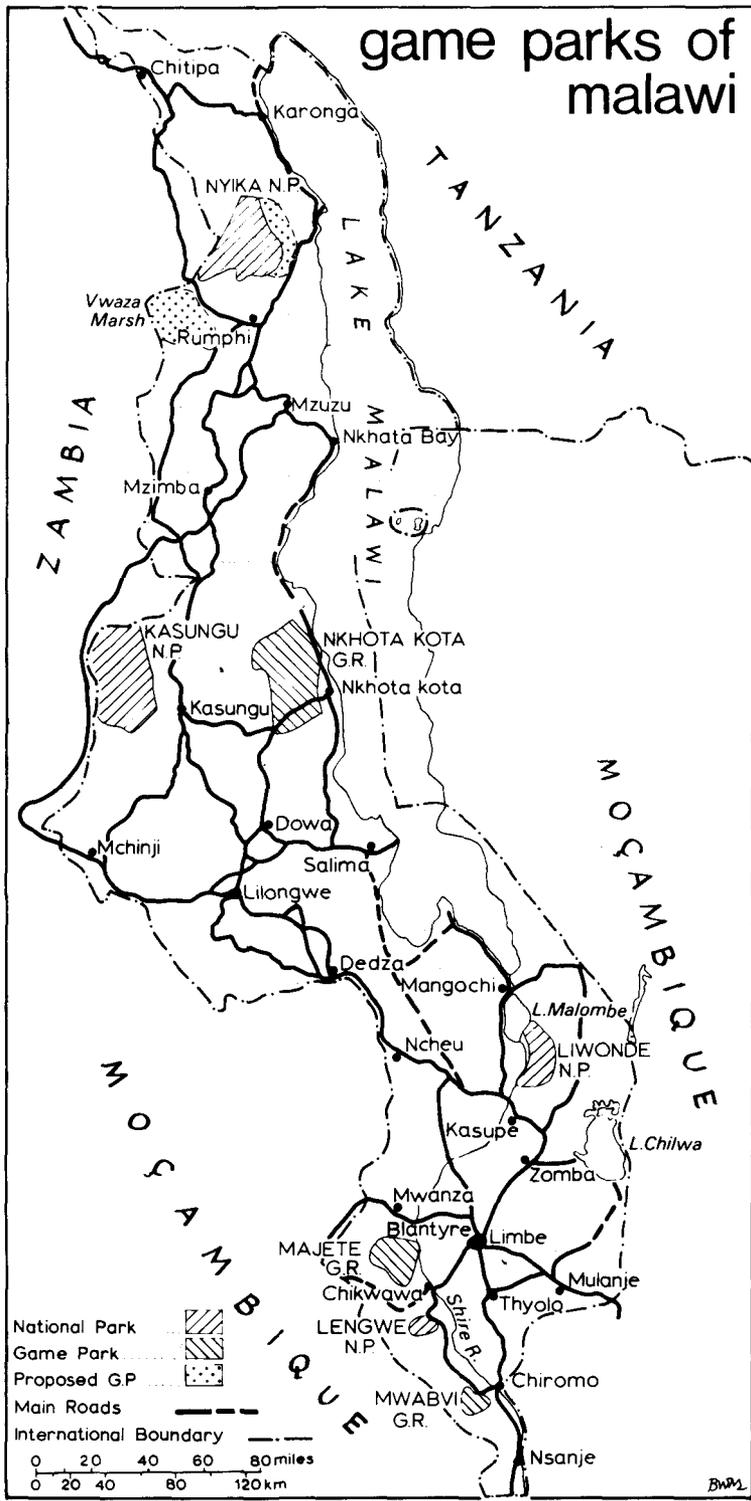
Although all these were formally gazetted as game reserves, very little else had ever been done to ensure that they functioned as such. There were very few guards; sometimes in the smaller reserves one guard alone was expected to maintain law and order. Their arms, if any, were a variety of rifles to deal with marauding animals in the cultivated areas surrounding the reserves, and it does not need much imagination to understand what happened! Except for a short period in 1929, when the late Rodney Wood acted as Game Warden, there was no pretence at creating a game department, and supervision of guards was in the hands of overworked district commissioners.

The Game and Forest Reserves Commission advised the abolition of four reserves for various reasons, one very good one being that too many small sanctuaries were dotted about the country, inadequately policed and inefficiently maintained. The four—the Chidiamperi, Vipya, Ngara/Nantundu and Kazuni Lake reserves—were eventually deproclaimed in 1950 (Government Notice 152). The following year the Tangadzi Stream Reserve in the Port Herald district was reduced in status from game reserve to a restricted hunting area (Government Notice 222). The Commission recommended the retention of the Lengwe Reserve in the Chikwawa district for the preservation of the rare nyala *Tragelaphus angasi*, and the Kasungu and Nkhotakota Reserves. In 1951 the Mwabvi Reserve in the Port Herlad district was gazetted to protect the few black rhinoceros remaining in the Southern Province; these four reserves are scheduled in the Game Ordinance, 1953.

In August, 1947 the Nyasaland Fauna Preservation Society (now the National Fauna Preservation Society of Malawi) was formed with the declared object of doing everything possible to preserve the rapidly dwindling wildlife resources of the country. For a long time the membership was small, but it included influential people capable of making their views, and those of the NFPS, known in both the Legislative Council and the Chamber of Commerce. In 1951, entirely through the efforts of this society, an area in the Chikwawa district was declared a non-hunting area with the object of eventually turning it into a game reserve, an aim achieved in 1955 when the Majete Game Reserve was gazetted (Government Notice 44). In 1952 another limited success was achieved when the society pressed for a national park on the Nyika plateau. At that time the Colonial Development Corporation was trying to establish conifer plantations on the plateau, and any idea of a national park had to await a decision regarding the success or failure of this venture; however, the open grasslands, covering approximately 360 square miles, were closed to hunting. After Independence the seeds sown by the NFPS bore fruit, and, in January 1966, the area was gazetted as the Malawi National Park, the country's first national park; the name was changed to Nyika in 1970, when the Kasungu and Lengwe reserves were upgraded to the status of national parks.

A very important recommendation from the Game and Forest Reserves Commission was that some sort of Game Department must be set up, and in 1949, the Game, Fish and Tsetse Control Department came into being. So far as wildlife conservation was

game parks of malawi



concerned, regrettably little was achieved over the next twelve years, but the department was very understaffed for the work it was expected to carry out, the political situation did not encourage the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries, and all the emphasis was on the control of marauding animals rather than their preservation. The foundations had, however, been laid, and when, in the latter part of 1962, the Game, Fish and Tsetse Control Department was wound up and responsibility for wildlife taken over by the Forestry Department, to be known as the Department of Forestry and Game, things began to improve considerably, and gained impetus with the publication in July 1963, of a Government Wildlife Policy Statement:

'It is the policy of the Malawi Government to afford all the protection in its power to game animals and wildlife in general in so far as such protection does not conflict with planned development of other essential national resources.

'In affording protection to game and wildlife the Government has in mind the value of this natural resource as a tourist attraction, as a possible source of food and as a scientific and educational asset of national importance.

It is the intention of the Government to afford protection to wildlife in all existing game reserves and forest reserves by means of enforcing restriction of hunting and the prevention of disturbance of the natural habitat. In other areas it is the intention to control the hunting of animals, birds and other forms of wildlife through restriction by licence both of hunting and of trade in game meat and trophies through the provisions of the Game Ordinance.

'The Government intends to encourage the fullest public support for its wildlife policy through education in wildlife conservation and by general publicity to stimulate the interest of the people of Malawi in the importance of wildlife as a national asset and to obtain the willing co-operation of the people in all wildlife conservation programmes.'

In 1969 some 56,000 acres on the east side of the Shire river in the Liwonde district were set aside as a potential national park and all hunting in the area prohibited. In 1970 (Government Notice 258) further legislation prohibited any new cultivation, erection of buildings or tree cutting, and in 1972 the Liwonde National Park was declared. Another proposed national park covers the Vwaza Marsh in the Northern Region. It is very largely due to the efforts of Chief Katumbi that this was declared a Controlled Area as far back as 1956 and that the protective legislation has been enforced since.

With five national parks and three game reserves the wheel has come full circle. Whatever the reasons wildlife had been steadily decreasing in numbers since 1859. Now, just over one hundred years later, there is not the slightest doubt that wildlife is again on the increase, even though, in modern conditions, preservation can only be in recognised parks and reserves.

Malawi probably now has as many wildlife sanctuaries as she can afford to set land aside for, and the species coverage is reasonably adequate. Now the emphasis must be on developing them and, at the same time, educating the people, and particularly the young people, to appreciate and protect this priceless heritage.