

Game and Fisheries Department, Uganda, 1950, Issues and Transitions

(Partial transcript of chapter 10, Lest We Forget, of Bruce Grant Kinloch's autobiography *The Shamba Raiders: Memories of a Game Warden*, 1972)

For the first six months between my first Western Province safari and Charles Pitman's retirement, I had concentrated at his suggestion, on getting to know the remainder of the country and the field staff and the problems of the Department, as thoroughly as I could in the time available. I had sailed the wide blue waters of Lake Albert with 'Bart' Bartholomew, the scion of the well-known Scottish map making family of that name. I had penetrated the swampy wilderness of Lake Kyoga with Don Rhodes, the Department's other newly-joined fisheries officer. I had explored the great elephant country of the Bunyoro-Gulu Game Reserve – later to become famous as the Murchison's Falls National Park – with that region's game warden, John Mills, the dread of every poacher in the area. And I had accompanied Mike Holmes to the Northern Province, there to establish him in Gulu as the first game warden ever to be permanently based in the home country of the Acholi. There were still some vital areas that I had yet to visit – such as the important game regions located in the remote Districts of West Nile and Karamoja – but, by the time I had replaced Charles Pitman in the Chief Game Warden's uncomfortable saddle, I had gained sufficient knowledge of Uganda to form a sound appreciation of the country's wildlife problems.

One fact seemed to shine out as clear and as bright as a beacon light – the greatest threat to Uganda's wildlife no longer lay in the problem of poaching but in the ambitious schemes of the post-war development planners. Common or garden poaching, with all its modern reinforcements, could not be ignored – but even more serious and more insidious dangers were hidden in the often grandiose land-use development projects that sprouted from the ashes of the Second World War. At the best these projects took no account of the effect on wildlife of their despoliation of the natural environment; at the worst they deliberately set out to destroy all major species of wild animals in the areas concerned. The official conscience was salved by an over-simplified policy summarised in a trite dogma which blandly stated that 'When the interests of man and wildlife conflict the interests of man shall prevail'. Few people outside the Game Department seemed able to detect the fallacy on which this fallacy was based; that the problem was never a question of a conflict between the interests of wild animals and man but between the rival interests of man himself. But then to appreciate the truth of this argument it was necessary to concede that wildlife itself was a valuable natural resource, a revolutionary thought at that particular time and a concept yet to be widely accepted.

In the existing circumstances what needed to be done? What were the priorities? What were the difficulties to be overcome? How were our objects to be achieved? First and foremost if wildlife was to be

preserved indefinitely in reasonable numbers, but in the right places, we had to gain the active support, and not merely the passive acquiescence, of the majority of the local people for sensible and necessary conservation measures, as well as obtaining adequate staff to implement the latter. This was obvious for generally unpopular restrictions and legislation could not be enforced either in the short or long term, and we knew that a future elected government rescind them. Secondly, to achieve the necessary public support we had to ensure that the Game Department's crop-protection service was as near as possible beyond reproach – Charles Pitman's long established policy – since we could not hope to convince the African population that game is a valuable economic asset unless we first showed them that it need not become a major nuisance to anyone if properly managed. The African is essentially a realist, and if we could demonstrate to him both the actual and potential economic value of Uganda's wildlife resources, and appeal to his budding national pride by revealing the great prestige value of his country's unique and beautiful game areas as being the envy of the western world, we would be a long way towards achieving our goal.

But before we tackled the general public we had to convert the central government! The first hurdle was a not unusual one – lack of necessary finance. The Game and Fisheries Department had long been one of the major sufferers from this scarcity of funds; it was the 'Cinderella' of the government departments, and its annual 'slice' of the budget 'cake' had always been the smallest. As a result, by 1950, the policy, establishment and work of the Game and Fisheries Department had remained virtually unchanged for many years. From its inception the Department had to fight against a widely held view that its mere existence was a 'luxury'.

In consequence, for a quarter of a century, the emphasis on the game side had almost entirely on the control of elephants and buffalo. There were no national parks and the game reserves – despite their magnificence as wildlife areas – were policed by a mere handful of game scouts, while the majority of the game guards, whose job was purely 'control', were perforce supervised by the Provincial Administration for there were only three game wardens to cover the entire 94,000 square miles of the Protectorate.

Uganda's freshwater fisheries were officially regarded as being of some value – mainly as a comparatively small local source of protein food – and therefore requiring minor care and attention; but despite not inconsiderable landings of a wide variety of fish from the country's fourteen thousand square miles of lakes, rivers and swamps, fisheries were not generally considered to be of any great consequence, with the notable exception of those of Lakes George and Edward. The responsibility for fisheries management had been tagged onto the Game Department in 1933, as a matter of convenience, but it was not until 1949 that the title of the Department was changed to 'Game and Fisheries'! There were only two

fisheries officers for the whole Protectorate, with a small force of fish guards, and there was no separate Ordinance to facilitate the management of the fishing industry. Furthermore, there were few facilities on the lakes – for example there were no motor-powered African fishing boats, and many of the nets in use were still being hand-braided from sewing cotton or the threads laboriously extracted from old motor tyres.

In 1950 the Game Department's equipment was limited, primitive or non-existent. We did have good rifles and camp equipment, but there was no departmental transport of any kind, no launches other than a few old harbour craft belonging to the Public Works Department, no fishing gear, and few funds for travelling. In fact, officers were often required to travel by local bus – where these existed! On Lake Kyoga, Don Rhodes, the Department's first fully qualified fisheries officer, even had to resort to hiring a dug-out canoe, and his wife and his African cook helped him with setting of experimental nets and long lines.

The headquarters office, with what can only be described as a skeleton staff, was housed in two dark antiquated and gloomy rooms with one equally gloomy, ancient and bat-infested store, all tucked away at the rear of a rambling, old-fashioned building that was mainly occupied by the Forestry Department and the Entebbe Magistrate's Court. There were also few office facilities in the field, whereby all administrative and clerical work had to be carried out from the officers' private houses. However, there were so few letters that there were no official typewriters in the field; or it is truer to say that there were so few letters because there were no typewriters? Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise, that in this instance, the 'good old days' really were the 'good old days'!

That is how it was in 1950. These were the problems with which I was faced. The small, austere simple organisation, which had served its purpose well enough for so many unhurried years, had become an anachronism almost overnight. Post-war threats and pressures demanded something bigger and better, no matter what the cost – or so I thought. I was soon to learn that the satraps of Uganda's Civil Service machine did not automatically share this view! That the 'old order changeth, yielding place to new'¹, was a natural development they accepted with reluctance.

I should have been warned by what Charles Pitman had said in his last official annual report, which was for the year 1949 – the year that the word 'Fisheries' was added to the title of the Uganda Game Department. "This is the first occasion since the establishment of the Department in 1925 that expenditure exceeded revenue", he wrote, but it must be realised that from 1933 onwards the Fisheries Section of the Department, which is non-revenue producing, has been steadily expanding. In 1949 the cost of the

¹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 1859

Fisheries staff... and their relevant activities, has deprived the Department of showing the customary excess of revenue over expenditure, This revenue is derived from the sale of Game and Special licences and from the proceeds of the sales of ivory, rhinoceros horns and hippopotamus teeth”.

The nature and somewhat apologetic tone of Charles Pitman’s remarks are misleading when viewed in the light of the popular opinions of the present day. They are certainly liable to be misinterpreted by the average reader, who may well take Pitman’s comment to indicate that for twenty-five years the chief aim and object of the Uganda Game Department had been to destroy enough elephants and issue sufficient hunting licences to pay for its own up-keep, regardless of the effect on the country’s wildlife resources. Such an erroneous interpretation would be both damaging and unfair to the reputation of an outstanding naturalist and conscientious game warden. The truth is that, although, over the years, the Department’s essential activities had regularly produced more than enough annual direct revenue to cover its essential running costs, this fact had largely fortuitous. However, Charles Pitman’s remarks do clearly reveal that throughout the long period of his stewardship, financially speaking he had been forced always to fight on the defensive. From the beginning he had been compelled, by the hard, blue pencils of hawk-eyed, stone-hearted treasury officials, to pinch, scrape and save in order to show an annual profit, without, at the same time, crippling the effectiveness of the Game Department as a wildlife conservation organisation.

Time-honoured concepts and long established policies die hard and when the demands of moral principles clash with the rigid dictates of economic necessity, the winner is seldom in doubt! In fact, I soon found that my first and biggest task was to persuade the government’s financial experts not only that Uganda’s wildlife was a true natural resource that had to be actively managed if it was to survive and flourish, but also that its economic value was no confined to the sale of elephant ivory and hunting licences alone. Eventually, I was convinced that the key to my problem lay in the magic word ‘Tourism’ – the still embryonic industry which had then only just begun to blossom in East Africa from the post-war boom in international air travel.

Under the present day conditions – particularly in the ‘big game’ countries of the world – sound wildlife conservation depends on three basic essentials. First of all there has to be adequate scientific knowledge on which all official management policies and planning must be based. Next, there has to be adequate legislation not only to enable these management plans properly to be implemented but also to control public utilisation of the wildlife resources. Finally, there has to be adequate staff both to implement the management plans and to enforce the necessary controlling legislation. In Uganda in 1950, there was none of these things for the simple reason that government thinking on wildlife matters had not kept pace with the speed of human development in other fields.

Uganda was not alone in this malaise. For years the main game areas of East and Central Africa had been protected as much as anything by their remoteness from major concentrations of human populations, coupled with the poorness of internal communications. Where game management problems had been officially recognised as such, it had usually been a question of protecting humans from wild animals rather than the reverse. In fact it is surprising how many people, at that time, fondly believed that all that was necessary to conserve game was to pass a few laws, make some fancy regulations, draw a few sweeping circles on a map and call them game reserves or national parks, and even arm the local people so that they could protect themselves and their crops from the depredations of wild animals. That legal restrictions, without adequate staff to enforce them, merely penalised the law-abiding citizens and turned a good many game reserves into 'poachers paradises', never seemed to occur to those who controlled the purse strings. 'Paper preservation' – to coin a phrase – may have salved the conscience of the highest government authority but it did not protect the game.

Who was to blame? The answer is probably 'No one!' Some have criticised the Colonial Office, the London bastion of Great Britain's now defunct 'Colonial Empire', which housed an expert technical adviser for each separate form of land-use and natural resource in the colonies. For instance, there was an 'Agricultural Adviser', a 'Veterinary Adviser', a 'Forestry Adviser', and so on. After the Second World War, they even appointed a 'Colonial Fisheries Adviser', but there was never an official adviser on colonial wildlife matters, although the indefatigable Keith Caldwell, in his retirement, did much to fill the gap in a strictly honorary, totally unpaid capacity. The reason, I think, was simply a question of economics. Proper wildlife conservation costs money and most of the countries where wild animals still existed in significant quantities during the colonial era were as poor as the proverbial church mouse; too poor, in fact, to contribute substantial sums for an emotional cause that offered no obvious economic benefit. Who else was to pay? The long suffering British tax-payer? His burden was heavy enough already, too heavy to expect him to shell out for yet another purely aesthetic project; while in those days international interest and financial aid for wildlife conservation were yet to be properly organised.

The whole picture altered when the conservation of wildlife in Africa ceased to be merely a moral problem and became the chief *raison d'être* of a tourist industry with a really massive economic potential.

When I became Chief Game Warden of Uganda, the value of wildlife as Africa's key attraction for the tourist became my chief sales line on the game side. With fisheries my task was easier; their economic potential was more obvious and Don Rhodes was a pillar of strength. A hard-headed, clear thinking and determined Yorkshireman, with a flair for figures, he could prove almost anything with an endless flow of irrefutable statistics that he produced, like a magician, from some apparently bottomless source. The

combined assault had the desired effect. The outer defences of the Secretariat were soon breached and, one by one, the various inner strong points of deeply entrenched resistance were overcome. Like all wars of attrition it was a slow process. Success was progressive and, although it took time and we had our full share of reverses, we gained virtually all our objectives in the end. I say 'we' deliberately, for as the Game and Fisheries Department expanded, its ideas and achievements depended more and more on a team approach.

People joined the Game and Fisheries Department not for financial reward – which was small – nor for the chances of advancement – which were virtually non-existent – but for their interest in wildlife and the relative freedom of the life that it offered. Formality was kept to a minimum, everyone's ideas were given a fair hearing, and the whole concern was based on a 'family' concept of mutual trust and co-operation. Our overall aim was to create a department that really was capable of both conserving and making optimum use of Uganda's wildlife and fisheries resources, in the face of post-war conditions and pressure, and to establish sound management plans for the protection and controlled utilisation of these resources. This may sound like starry-eyed idealism but, on balance, the policy and the system worked well. In fact, it was the only feasible way to manage and get the best out of such a widely scattered bunch of dedicated and determined individuals. Inevitably, we had our fair share of internal 'family' quarrels and I remember one game warden, who had been transferred to Karamoja, complaining bitterly about the quality of the game guards he had inherited from his predecessor. "Never mind, John", I wrote to him consolingly, reminding him of an old saying, 'one man's swans are another man's geese!' His reply was explosive, "Geese!" He wrote bitterly, "Geese! You should see this lot. They're not geese, they're vultures!"

Appendix

Protection of the Leopard

Attention is invited to the protection which has been afforded the leopard by the terms of Legal Notice No. 9 of 1945, published in the Official Gazette dated the 15th January, 1945. The leopard may now be hunted lawfully only by the holder of a full Game License (valid for 12 months from the date of issue) or the holder of a 14-day license (valid 14 days only). The sale of all leopard skins is absolutely prohibited, and permits for their sale will no longer be granted.

The prohibition on the hunting of the leopard in no way affects the rights of a person to defend himself or his property from a marauding leopard.

The reason for the protection is the excessive slaughter of leopards which has been taking place owing to the very high prices which are now paid for leopard skins.

At the present rate of killing the leopard would soon be exterminated and this creature plays an important part in the economy of the country, by keeping down pig and the smaller antelopes which cause considerable damage to the agriculturalists, it is essential to prevent its extermination.

R J D Salmon, Acting Game Warden, 22nd January 1945, Letter to the Editor, *Uganda Herald*

This was preceded by a Notice on the Sale and Export of Leopard Skins, issued by R J D Salmon, Acting Game Warden, Kampala, 15.1.45

The sale of leopard skins is now illegal and in future permits will not be granted by the Game Department to sell or purchase leopard skins, neither will permits be granted for the export of leopard skins from Uganda.

Source: the newspaper cutting was in the British Library copy of Kinloch's book