

# **ROMANCE, REVERENCE, RESEARCH, RIGHTS: WRITING ABOUT ELEPHANT HUNTING AND MANAGEMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, c.1830s TO THE PRESENT**

## **TITLE SLIDE**

I would like to thank Sally MacRoberts for her introduction and for the invitation extended by the Brenthurst Library to give this talk tonight. It is always a pleasure to be part of the Library's events and also to be able to use this incomparable resource. It has been a great privilege for me to have been associated with the library since 1986 when I first began work on my book about the war artist Melton Prior. Over the years I have made good friends, learnt a lot and gained much from all the people I have met here or worked with in the library. And thank you to you, as the audience, for coming to listen to what I have to say.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY**

I am not a scientist, conservation manager, or elephant savant but call myself an environmental historian. As a sub-field of history, our field of interest is the interface between nature and culture. As historians, our pre-occupation is with change over time – a chronology and an analysis of factors that lead to change or create conditions for change.

Environmental history forms part of the humanities – the purpose of which is to interrogate what it means to be human, and to attempt to understand the human condition from the inside.

Environmental history has been defined as an umbrella discipline, a topic and a methodology that brings together a multitude of areas of study, including natural sciences, literature, economics and the social sciences.

## **FASCINATION WITH ELEPHANTS**

Humans appear to have been fascinated by elephants – for many and diverse reasons – from time immemorial. As Africans, we have a close geographical connection with elephants and as South Africans we have opportunities galore to see them, to read about them, and to learn about them in all aspects of their lives and ours.

They are not the only animals to which many human animals of the 21st century feel an affinity. Whales and dolphins are others, but it does seem to be true that the closer we think other species are to 'us', that they display characteristics we regard as 'human', joy, compassion, sociality etc. the more we value and emphasise with them. Thinking about mosquitoes or chameleons does not evoke the same response from society as elephants do. But who knows whether in future, when we discover that chameleons too have emotions, for example, we may include them in the creature we think should have specific rights.

## **SURVEY SOME OF THE LITERATURE OVER 150 YEARS**

My purpose: This evening I will survey some of the important literature dealing with southern African elephants.

I will chart some of the changing attitudes towards this species as they appears in a variety of non-fiction writing. However, attitudes to elephant also tell us about changing environmental ideas and human behavior.

In analyzing what I think might be considered key texts, one discovers that ‘writing the elephant’ elucidates many human attitudes towards the environment and demonstrates transformations within our constructions of nature and culture.

### **ELEPHANTS**

Why elephants?

Elephants seem particularly appropriate subjects for such an analysis because they are the largest of the charismatic African land mammals

and bear an especial burden of cultural constructs and ethics.

As arguments about the future of elephants clearly show, people are polarized, debates around conflicting value systems are sharpened and emotions are highly charged.

### **ELEPHANTS**

it is also appropriate to discuss African elephants in terms of current environmental historiography. The “animal turn” in the social sciences has proliferated in the field of ecocriticism, although a good deal of this literature is avowedly political, even polemic. Nonetheless, Harriet Ritvo argues that there is currently more “animal history” because of the political purchase and high profile of animal related causes, as well as to the growth of environmental history.

Both Ritvo and Keith Thomas have pointed out, that the history of the treatment of animals tells us a great deal about human societies. Considering elephants provides a rich gateway into aspects of human thinking, especially in connection with current changes in inter-species ethics.

Elephants, together with a number of other animal genera, are spearheading the increasingly vocal animal rights movement, a development that historian and wilderness advocate Roderick Nash foresaw many years ago. On the basis of an ever-extending network of rights that he suggested had incrementally included slaves, women and indigenous people, Nash argued that animals would be “liberated” and, eventually, so would the environment itself. In some respects these debates can be encapsulated by considering the growing political relevance of non-human animals (and the radicalization of the animal rights movement), as well as the contrasting philosophies of sustainable use and the primacy of any animal’s right to life.

## THESEN POEM

Hunting elephant has been an enduring topic and I would like to begin by referring to a modern poem by South African Hjalmar Thesen which identifies the theme of my talk.

... And so we flung our thundering steels of lead,  
Saw hide give up a cloud of river clay,  
Saw knees unbend, saw ragged ears on high,  
Heard thickets tear, heard echoes fly away  
And watched you stagger, crash to earth and lie  
Quite still, a silent pile, a hill of dark  
Among a wilderness. Slowly folding  
Silence captured all; a palace stark  
Without a court, a palace garden holding  
Emptiness and a king dead on his throne,  
We stood bemused, deafened, furtive and alone.

Final lines of *Elephant hunt* by Hjalmar Thesen

## AFRICAN AND ASIAN ELEPHANTS

ASIAN ELEPHANTS African and Asian elephants are not the same. Asian elephant is named *Elephas maximus*. Human behaviour and attitudes towards African and Asian elephants are not the same. In past centuries African elephants were used for entertainment in Roman games and circuses, and played their part in warfare. There are also isolated records of African elephants being tamed as beasts of burden and today some captive elephants are used for safari treks, but they have never been domesticated on the scale that they have in India and elsewhere in South Asia.

## AFRICAN ELEPHANT

*Loxodonta Africana*

## DECORATED ASIAN ELEPHANT

Asian elephants are physically, economically and socially very close to the humans with whom they interact, being brought out on special occasions dressed up in decorative regalia.

## WORSHIPPED

They are worshipped by some communities – here is the elephant god Ganesha

## WORKING

But they are also integral to the economic life of other communities – logging in India, for example was mainly carried out by elephants in difficult terrain during an imperial era.

### **ORWELL QUOTATION**

In his powerful anti-imperial essay *Shooting an elephant*, George Orwell (1950) expressed some of this value. The elephant, a male in musth, had, in Orwell's words 'destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock ... I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud ... the people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him ... caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth ...' (Orwell 1950:3-4).

Despite Orwell's belief that it would 'be murder to shoot' the elephant, and commenting that 'somehow it always seems worse to kill a *large* animal', the taking of the human life had to be avenged. Moreover, the rights of the elephant's owner had to be considered; 'Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly' (Orwell 1950:7).

### **AFRICAN ELEPHANTS WITH LONG TUSKS**

In southern Africa this debate is intense for the opposite reason: there are too many elephants and humans have intervened to decide what to do about limiting their numbers and reversing or minimizing the habitat destruction that an over-population causes. In the course of the arguments about their future all over Africa, elephants have polarized opinion, sharpened debates around conflicting value systems and raised emotions to an extreme degree. While the written word has played a fundamental role in shaping public opinion on these issues, books and articles are augmented by a huge number of wildlife documentaries that are aired almost daily on television and presented in movies.

### **IVORY STOCKPILE**

What an economic contrast between the Burmese elephant and Africa's herds! Unlike the Asian elephant of which little is globally heard today, Africa's elephants are a topical subject because they are worth so much more dead than alive. It is their ivory that has international value. Although fenced into national parks and other protected areas, Africa's elephants are wild, not domesticated, and they shoulder an enormous international nature conservation burden because in many parts of Africa they are illegally hunted and their numbers are dwindling. As is well known, there is an international ban on the trade in ivory in order that elephants in East and West Africa recover their numbers.

### **INCOME FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN AFRICA?**

Money raised from selling ivory legally (it is otherwise wasted) might provide clinics, schools, roads, houses, clean drinking water and other infrastructure that southern African governments battle to supply to their citizens, hobbled as they are by the paucity of resources in the crisis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the challenges of underdevelopment and lack of capacity. In the course of the arguments about their future all over Africa, elephants have polarized opinion, sharpened debates around conflicting value systems and raised emotions to an extreme degree.

### SWIFT QUOTATION

I would now like to take you back a few centuries with a well known quotation:

So geographers, in Afric-maps,  
With savage-pictures fill their gaps;  
And o'er uninhabitable downs  
Place elephants for want of towns

*On Poetry: A rhapsody, l. 177.*

### MUNSTER MAP

These lines by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) are often dismissed as a satire on the inventive cartography of the age. However, they contain three significant observations. The first is that elephants are the iconic and most charismatic mammals of Africa – indeed, its very symbol. As Adams and McShane observe, ‘No other species carries as much symbolic or emotional force. Fascination with elephants is hardly a new phenomenon – man has by turns worshipped, idealized, contemplated, or slaughtered elephants, but rarely ignored them.’ The second observation is that elephants were once very widely distributed on the African continent, occurring wherever there was suitable habitat, while the third is that where large settled concentrations of humans occur, one will find either no elephants or very few.

### CARL LINNAEUS

Around the time that Swift died, Carl Linnaeus – writing in a different genre and within an entirely different discourse – described the elephant. In his 1758 taxonomy of living animals and plants, Linnaeus put African and Asian elephants into a single genus, *Elephas*.

But as early as 1797 Johan Blumenbach (a medical scientist with a penchant for dividing people according to race) separated them into the Asian *Elephas* and the African *Loxodonta*.

Evidence from DNA-based studies as well as differences in habitat and morphology suggest that there are two species in Africa: *L. africana* (savanna elephant) and *L. cyclotis* (forest elephant) (e.g. Roca *et al.* 2001),

but there is no final consensus in the scientific community about the distinction and the IUCN recognizes only one, *L. africana*.

## **ELEPHANTS CRUCIAL ROLE IN AFRICAN HISTORY**

Elephants have played a crucial role in Africa's history. Ivory is by far the most significant by-product of Africa's elephants. Unlike numerous other natural resources, ivory does not deteriorate quickly, people can transport it, and over the centuries it has retained its high commercial value. White, opaque, flexible, smooth and fine-grained throughout the tusk, the African variety of ivory is softer and easier to work than the Asian by cutting, sawing, painting, staining, slicing and carving. Ivory has been a thread that has linked the people of Africa with the outside world and shaped perceptions of the continent.

## **IVORY: POLITICAL POWER, WEALTH AND TRADE**

Over millennia ivory has determined and altered Africa's relationship with the rest of the world. It has also transformed many African communities. Control of the trade in ivory brought power and wealth to many African leaders, enabled Africans to have power over and exploit one another, and it laid the foundations of strong states and the emergence of hierarchies based on wealth and class. In precolonial times, whole tusks were brought in as tribute to chiefs from vassals and clients, and ivory was used for personal adornment in an ostentatious display of wealth. Ivory was exchanged for iron and other useful metals that contributed to improved methods of cultivation, as well as for cloth, beads and other goods and, in later centuries, firearms and liquor.

## **IVORY CARVINGS**

Modern Western writing about elephants generally does not extol the beauty of ivory. At a time when this product is the reason why many influential people in the Western world mourn the diminution of the elephants, it might be regarded as irresponsible and politically and morally incorrect to harp on the aesthetics of the product and the satisfaction of ownership. Nonetheless, for more than ten thousand years the 'subtle glowing colour and sensual surface' of ivory (Luxmoore 1991) has ensured its prominent position among the luxury goods of the world. This market is particularly sensitive to taste and fashion and demand, and our own is not the only era in which exploitation has led to the virtual extinction of local elephant populations. Pliny, for example, complained in 77 AD that the North African elephant herds had been wiped out.

## **CARVED IVORY MASKS**

Later, a major peak in supply and demand occurred during the nineteenth century with the industrialisation of Europe and the United States. At that time, practical as well as luxury objects made of ivory became very popular with the growing middle class, and the market expanded. Because of its abundance, ivory became the 'plastic of the age', being turned into knife handles, piano-keys, billiard balls, games, scientific instruments, tool handles and ornaments.

### **HANKOS AND NETSUKE**

In the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, ivory was used less frequently in the West, but in the 1970s demand from Asia – for ivory ornaments and for popular Chinese and Japanese signature seals, *hankos* – peaked and this took its toll on elephant numbers particularly in East Africa, leading to a ban on ivory exports from Africa. Some scholars give the ivory price as remaining virtually stable at \$5 per kg over the period 1950 to 1970, but quickly rising as high as \$75 per kg by 1978. In some respects ivory still determines Africa's relationship with the rest of the world. Because the West abhors the ivory trade, animal rights organisations pay large amounts of money to African states to prevent elephant killings. As Parker (2004) explains with respect to East Africa, this leads to vicious internal politicking around poaching and frequently to corruption. In the case of southern Africa, large donations from organisations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) raise accusations of a new imperialism.

### **BAINES WAGONS ON MARKET SQUARE GRAHAMSTOWN**

In southern Africa unsustainable ivory extraction went hand-in-hand with colonial expansion. But ivory extraction has never promoted a strong and sustainable economy, but instead a fragile one based on a single product. Moreover, the quest for ever increasing amounts of ivory led to a traders' frontier, moving further into the interior taking with it warfare and slavery, often leaving economic collapse in its wake.

### **SAN ROCK ART**

While the ivory issue has certainly captured the public imagination, so also has the interesting scientific inquiry into elephant behaviour and the structure of elephant society. It is this aspect of the literature that I would now like to turn to and provide the first of my four short discussions around specific writings about elephant. In doing so, I take note of the observation of Adams and McShane (1992:86) that modern scientific research on the subject has taken place in a cultural vacuum.

## ROCK ART DIAGRAM

My first example comes from new thinking around San rock art. Oral tradition is the literature for non-literate pre-colonial societies who were farmers or miners, but it is the visual which is the characteristic mode in which foragers and hunter-gatherers, such as the San (Bushmen) and Aboriginal Australians, expressed themselves culturally and spiritually. South Africa is immensely rich in San rock art. For very many years the pictorial representations of animals, people and hunting scenes were regarded as recreational drawings and realistic illustrations of a 'simple' lifestyle executed by 'simple people'.

Current scholarship, particularly by David Lewis-Williams, has led to a nuanced understanding of the spiritual foundations of San society, and it is indisputable that beliefs and worldviews find expression in rock paintings and engravings. It is now accepted that this work was generally executed by shamans, people with special powers in the community, able through trance and painting to link the temporal with the spiritual and to ensure the health and well-being of the group through the intervention of the spirit world. In this respect, the large ox-like eland *Taurotragus oryx* had a pre-eminent role, being a major intermediary between the two domains and this animal dominates the rock art.

In comparison with eland, paintings of elephants are not as common, but there are examples of painted and engraved elephant figures sometimes shown being hunted by a large party of men. Fragments remain of a painted frieze of elephants at Grootkraal near Wodehouse, and there are also a few therianthropes with elephant heads and trunks. Deacon believes that elephant may be linked symbolically with water and some scholars think that the !Kung consider elephant to have remarkable potency because its meat is of all three types: red, black and white.

## ELEPHANTS IN BOXES P.1

The Cederberg mountain range of the Western Cape is the site of a substantial number of elephant paintings and there is a series of work that has caught attention for many years. It consists of around 30 elephants in what have been called 'boxes': the encirclement by a network of zigzag and crenellated lines of a group of differently-sized elephants together with human figures wearing elephant-trunk disguises. The date of the painting is unknown, but it is likely to be at least a few centuries old. In the 1960s these depictions were interpreted realistically as elephants (which are shown in profile) enclosed within a barrier, such as a pitfall trap. By the 1980s it was suggested by more sophisticated scholarship that the paintings reflect 'trance vision ... a stage of San trance performance in which the elephant, a culturally controlled and highly emotive symbol of trance power, was superimposed upon physiologically controlled hallucinatory forms'. At that time, the zigzag lines were interpreted as 'the aura seen around vision during trance' (Paterson 2007).



However, following upon modern scientific research into elephant communication, rock art researchers have looked afresh at these elephants and the 'boxes'. Attention has been given to the variation in the ages and sizes of the elephant and it is now believed that at least one of the paintings represents a family or kinship group of about ten animals with the cows and calves depicted together and the bulls on the edge, just as pioneering elephant biologist Iain Douglas-Hamilton had observed for science in the 1970s.

### **ELEPHANT CLOSE UP IN BOXES P.3**

Owing to fresh knowledge, the zigzag lines and the elephant trunks shown close to the ground in the rock art in the Cederberg are currently postulated to be elephants sensing underground vibrations and communicating over long distances. There is now strong scientific evidence that elephant vocalisation at low frequency – infrasound – keeps animals in contact with each other and that information, in connection with rainfall for instance, can also be relayed through ground vibrations. The fact that elephant could communicate seismically and acoustically seems to have been known by the San, perhaps even utilised by them in a kind of symbiotic way. The consensus thus seems to be that the San, whether shamans or not, had 'an in-depth knowledge of the social structure and communication systems of elephants ... and that we might be looking at some of man's earliest markings representing sound' (Paterson 2007; Blight 2007).

### **PIX OF MICHAEL GARSTANG, JOYCE POOLE AND GAY BRADSHAW**

Douglas-Hamilton's work has now been extended into the realm of elephant communication by a number of scientists, animal psychologists and ethologists – among them are Caitlin Rodwell, Michael Garstang, Joyce Poole and Gay Bradshaw. Their work is worth reading.

## 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY HUNTING ACCOUNTS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

I now turn to texts that are examples of the hunting literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### NINETEENTH CENTURY HUNTING EXPEDITION

When the Dutch East India Company established its station at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 and introduced firearms, new ivory routes opened up in southern Africa. In the late 1700s and early 1800s parties of trekboers and traders penetrated the northern interior of the sub-continent search of ivory and other commercial products of the hunt for subsistence and trading purposes. Soon others followed in their wake including, for example, the scientific expedition of Andrew Smith and those of recreational sport hunters, such as William Cornwallis Harris and Roualeyn Gordon Cumming, who funded their adventures by selling the ivory they collected. More significant in terms of numbers were the large Voortrekker parties who were not visitors and itinerants, but potential settlers cementing partnerships with African mercenary hunters and seeking to establish independent polities in the interior that bypassed the British colonies and linked up with Delagoa Bay in present day Mozambique. Elephant hunting was a major factor accelerating colonial expansion into the southern African interior and the available abundant ivory seems to have been the major product that sustained it. This hunter-trader lifestyle was encouraged by settler society, through the belief that ridding the countryside of wildlife was a pioneering and patriotic necessity in order to create a 'civilised' state. In this regard, the ivory trade can be argued to have been a by-product of the competition between humans and elephants for land – a matter that resonates with elephant management concerns today.

### PORTRAIT OF CORNWALLIS HARRIS

The Boer settler commercial hunters have not bequeathed a literature and what we know of their hunting activities comes from evidence in debates around the law and from observations about them from literate travellers. One of the most famous of the literate sport-hunter travellers was also the first: William Cornwallis Harris, whose books initiated a new genre in African literature. Harris, a British army officer stationed in India, arrived in South Africa in 1836 to spend his leave on a hunting expedition.

### HUNTING THE WILD ELEPHANT

He devoted a considerable part of his book to describing how he hunted elephants – for their tusks certainly, but also for ‘science’ and, far more importantly for Harris, for entertainment. He captures the drama well. An elephant footprint, imprinted during a particularly fierce thunderstorm, is carefully measured and, according to Harris, because science has determined that the height of an elephant is twice the circumference of the footprint, he has encountered the spoor of the largest specimen possible – 12 feet tall (Harris 1852:167).

### ‘ASIAN ELEPHANT’

While hugely enjoying himself and the freedom from restrictions on hunting, Harris sometimes felt that he was killing his own tame elephant in India – and this illustration looks more like an Asian than an African elephant.

### TEXT

A scene in the Magaliesberg – a range of mountains straddling Pretoria and Rustenburg – of three hundred elephants, is for him a ‘grand panorama’, ‘a picture at once soul-stirring and sublime’.

From the description he offers of this incident, it is clear that Harris is among a herd of females (which he refers to as ‘ladies’) and their young. After he has ‘attacked’ and killed some of the females, he realizes that the babies are deeply attached to their mothers, one of them going around a corpse, ‘with touching demonstrations of grief, piping sorrowfully and vainly attempting to raise her with its tiny trunk’.

Harris later confesses that ‘I had felt compunctions in committing the murder the day before, and now half resolved never to assist in another’, an emotion strengthened because he could not rid himself of the feeling that he was killing his own tame elephant in India (Harris 1852:168-175). Despite the recognition that what he was doing might be construed as ‘murder’, Harris did not desist and his book abounds with descriptions of profligate elephant killing and details of the gory process of extracting tusks.

### COVER OF GORDON CUMMING

Another example of the extremely popular hunting books from this period is the well known and often quoted *A hunter's life in South Africa* by Roualeyn Gordon Cumming, first published in 1850.

### KILLING ELEPHANT AT NIGHT

Cumming longed for an encounter with ‘the noble elephants’, and when he got his wish, he had no hesitation to killing them even at night (Cumming n.d.:178-180).

### TEXT RE EXPERIMENTS

He also records torturing elephants in an experiment to see how long it would take them to die (Cumming n.d.:227-228). Cumming summarized his activities by explaining that the killing of an elephant was ‘so overpoweringly exciting that it almost takes a man’s breath away’ (Cumming n.d.:230). Nevertheless, he was not insensitive to the fact that the elephant was a ‘wonderful animal’, that it had a defined social structure and patterns of behaviour, that it had a well developed sense of smell and means of communicating with each other (Cumming n.d.:180).

### ADULPHE DELEGORGUE

Cumming was initially described as ‘bold, enterprising and skilful’, but a decade or so later was relegated to being ‘an unprincipled man and an indiscriminate slaughterer’ (Carruthers 2005:189) as taking pleasure in killing increasingly became morally indefensible behaviour. Today, we would regard some of the men (it is never women) I quote below as totally unethical in their attitudes to killing and to elephants. Delegorgue (1990) whose diaries were written in the late 1830s and early 1840s, ‘took possession’ of a dead elephant by walking on its carcass, having given it an extra bullet to stop it from uttering ‘a sobbing noise’ as it lay dying (Delegorgue 1990:227).

In addition to the distaste that sensitive modern readers have with the reckless and often wasteful killings perpetrated by these hunters, is also difficult to reconcile environmental statements such as the following with the actions of the people who made them. Take Delegorgue for example: ‘What paltry reason can justify the death and destruction of such beautiful, strong and excellent animals? What are a couple of hundred pounds of ivory compared with the long service which such animals might render to man for generations? ... I was perfectly conscious of the mischief I was doing but I was a hunter first and foremost. The elephant is reckoned the *nee plus ultra* where *ignamazane* (game) is concerned. I desired no other; all the animals of creation, whatsoever they may be, are as nothing compared with the elephant.’

### AS FOR A YOUNG ELEPHANT

As for a young elephant, only about six feet high, Delegorgue wrote that ‘his face was so comical that I wanted to burst out laughing, for, protruding beyond his lips were tusks only ten inches long. I had a sudden desire to shoot him so that I could inspect him at leisure when he was dead’ (Delegorgue 1997:3-4).

### THOMAS BAINES EATING SCENE

In addition to ivory collection for later sale, the hunting of elephants enabled white hunters to attract African assistants and followers by providing firearms and food. Thoas Baines commented on the choice parts for culinary purposes – the feet and the trunk.

### QUOTATION FROM HENRIQUES

Perhaps a later writer of the 1930s, Robert Henriques, in his book *Death by moonlight* (1938:200), succinctly expressed what they were doing: 'I hunt big game frankly and brutally because not otherwise can I find the same disappointments and reverses, the same excitements, the same antagonists, and the same exhilarating rewards ... Above all, I get from it a moment of triumph and of pure emotion which I have never found elsewhere' (quoted in Hammond & Jablow 1970:159-160).

### AND GRAY

In his as yet unsurpassed survey, Stephen Gray (1979) raised southern African hunting writing into a literary genre by giving it status, definition and tradition. Gray observed how the southern African landscape 'becomes a playground for inflated bullies who measure fun in terms of the humbling of brutes greater in size than themselves', where they could indulge in sadistic activities (Gray 1979:98, 104).

Gray also identified the mythic element in these texts, particularly the depiction of life as a contest, in which evil, cunning and intelligent large animals are defeated by humans, and he appreciated too the literary craftsmanship that went into some of the romantic descriptions, the drama of the episodes and the erudite references to poetry and novels (Gray 1979:103-104). Pratt (1992) and Hammond and Jablow (1970) have much the same to say about this literary discourse, although they do not always make it specific to southern Africa.

### ELEPHANT NUMBERS 1652-1900

The number of elephants in pre-colonial South Africa cannot be determined, but it has been suggested that there may have been around 100 000 before white settlement in 1652 (Hall-Martin 1992). By 1900, owing to commercial and sport-hunting and to the modernization of South Africa almost all had been exterminated. They had been reduced to four relict populations totaling fewer than 200 individuals, located in the forested Knysna area of today's Western Cape coastline (30-50), in the dense succulent thicket Addo area of today's Eastern Cape (130-140), and an unknown but very small number in the tropical coastal Tembe area of Maputaland, in today's KwaZulu-Natal, and in the Mpumalanga lowveld Olifants River gorge on the boundary between South Africa and Mozambique.

### *A CHANGE IN PACE AND DISCOURSE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

The largest remaining population of the four isolated communities of elephants – probably 130 individuals – was in the Addo area of the Eastern Cape (Hoffman 1993). These had survived because of the specific local vegetation. Today called xeric thicket (comprising some 3 000 species of which about 750 are endemics), it is 'a closed shrubland to low forest dominated by evergreen, sclerophyllous or succulent trees, shrubs and vines, many of which have stem spines. It is often almost impenetrable, is generally not divided into strata, and has little herbaceous cover' (Lubke 1996). After the First World War there were initiatives to modernize the economy in this district by investing in commercial agriculture.

Along the Sundays River, close to the Addo thicket, government invested in a large and expensive irrigation scheme to encourage the development of large citrus estates. For the elephants, this was an irresistible attraction: water and food in quantity. It was a dilemma as 'progress' and 'wildlife' clashed and farmers complained bitterly about their losses. After a formal state enquiry, it was decided to kill all these elephants, despite the opinion of some, like the Director of the Port Elizabeth Museum, F.W. FitzSimons, that 'the deliberate extermination of these elephants, would, upon grounds of deeply-felt general sentiment, and in the interests of science, be received by not only very high and influential circles in South Africa, but by the general feeling of the civilized world with condemnation, as a step reflecting no credit upon South Africa' (Fitzsimons 1920:270-271).

### PORTRAIT OF PJ PRETORIUS

Once the government had taken a decision to eradicate all the elephants in the Addo district to make it safe for the citrus industry, the question arose as to who would take on the task. Having apparently first approached famous hunters such as F.C. Selous and Harry Johnson (Pretorius 1948:187-188), it fell to a small, dark-skinned man, Phillip Jacobus Pretorius, an Afrikaner and descendant of the Boer hero Andries Pretorius, after whom Pretoria is named. Born in 1877 (he died in 1945) on a farm in the Waterberg district of the then Transvaal Republic, Pretorius led an extraordinarily adventurous life.

### PICTURE OF JUNGLE MAN

In the 1930s he was persuaded to record his experiences, but as he was not a competent writer, he had considerable assistance with the task (Hoffman 1993). The autobiography appeared in 1948 as *Jungle man: The autobiography of Major P.J. Pretorius C.M.G. D.S.O. and Bar*. It was not published in South Africa but in England and Australia, and it was later translated into Dutch and published in Amsterdam.

It is noteworthy that *Jungle Man*, ostensibly conceived in the literary genre pioneered by Harris and Cumming, was the first book in this vein written by a local Afrikaner. Pretorius presents himself as a national hero and the laudatory foreword to the book was written by Jan Smuts.

At the time of the Addo elephant killing, Smuts was Prime Minister of South Africa and, somewhat ironically in terms of his praise of the book and of Pretorius personally, he was deeply committed to wildlife conservation and involved in negotiations to establish the Kruger National Park. Smuts wrote: 'I gladly write a foreword to this amazing book ... The tale of continuous adventure for a lifetime which it records is surely one of the most extraordinary ever written. I have never seen a more thrilling story of a hunter's life. It is full of almost unbelievable incidents, of reckless daring, and of hairbreadth escapes'. In big game hunting, Pretorius according to Smuts, 'seems to have found his best self-expression and to be the true artist' (Pretorius 1948:5-6).

### **PRETORIUS WITH HIS IVORY TRAIN**

Pretorius's heroic stature was not only based on his extermination of the Addo elephants (from June 1919 to July 1920); he had also been a highly successful commercial ivory hunter in central and East Africa and these exploits appear in his book. Moreover, he was chief scout to Smuts's forces in the campaign against the Germans in Tanganyika during the First World War and apparently remarkable for his intelligence gathering and tracking ability that helped to vanquish a powerful enemy. Perhaps Smuts admired Pretorius for the same qualities that Theodore Roosevelt believed that hunting imparted to men. It is 'among the best of all national pastimes ... it cultivates that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone' (quoted in Watson 2003:105). *Jungle man* explains not only how Pretorius waged outright war on the elephants of Addo for a year, but also depicts his extensive commercial ivory hunting exploits in central and East Africa. Pretorius's career began in the service of Cecil Rhodes's Chartered Company in what was to become Rhodesia. (Pretorius 1948:121).

### **ELEPHANT PHOTO FROM SA NATIONAL PARKS**

According to his own account, Pretorius was apparently initially reluctant to take on the extermination of the Addo elephants, creatures that had inhabited this landscape 'since time began' (Pretorius 1948:187). He went on a reconnaissance visit to the district, a 'hunter's hell', he said, where the scrub was very thick, spiky and thorny and the elephants, in his opinion, not worth shooting for their ivory because their tusks were very small. For some months he reconnoitered the area, trying to find people to help him in the task. Eventually, he persuaded some prisoners from the town of Uitenhage (they had nothing to lose) to assist.

Pretorius's book of his Addo exploits is certainly unusual in the hunting literature, for he describes extraordinary techniques such as using ladders to get above the scrub even to get a glimpse of the elephants. They moved around not as individuals, but in herds – they could not be seen from ground level and they burst through the dense thicket in numbers and without warning.

### **PRETORIUS PHOTO OF CLOSEUP ELEPHANT**

Pretorius explains how he had to kill the elephants at exceptionally close range (never more than ten yards distant) – often in danger of his own life as they charged him. He also had to shoot the animals in places, such as along the spine, which were not in the usual repertoire of a big game hunter but which Pretorius prided himself on being able to achieve because of his long experience. As other hunter-writers had before him, he described being followed by newly orphaned baby elephants he calls 'Dumbos' (presumably alluding to the 1939 children's book *Dumbo the flying elephant* by Helen Aberson), some of which Pretorius sold to Boswell's circus. In the course of just over a year, killing between three and five elephants almost every week, Pretorius reduced the number of elephants in the Addo bush from about 130-150 to 16. He was proud of his success, 'It was a dramatic thought that I had fought and defeated a family of elephants that had held undisputed sway in that bush for thousands of years' (Pretorius 1948: 210).



Unlike the entertainment and ivory that elephant hunting had offered the sport-hunters, Pretorius was obliterating elephant merely because they hampered economic ‘progress’ in a commercial culling operation. Although it was said at the time that Pretorius had collected ‘a wealth of data ... calculated to set the scientific world agog’ on the elephants that he killed, this information was never made available, possibly because the documents were lost, possibly for reasons of professional jealousy and animosity between Pretorius and the Director of the South African Museum in Cape Town (Hoffman 1993:29). In any event, for Pretorius, this was a business venture. Under contract from the Cape provincial administration, it is estimated that he earned in the region of £6 000, in addition to his sales of elephant and elephant products to local and international museums and to the circus (Hoffman 1993).

Ironically, for reasons that are not entirely clear, but which almost certainly included Pretorius’s own wish (Hoffman 1993), as soon as the numbers of elephant had been so drastically reduced, the survivors were given protection within a game reserve, proclaimed by the Cape Province and upgraded in 1931 to the Addo Elephant National Park. Today this park, with its large number of elephants (some 500), is a major tourist attraction of the area. Beginning with a very small core area that fenced in the elephants, it has been expanded to include a wide range of habitats and offers protection to the biodiversity of the xeric thicket biome.

In the account of killing the Addo elephants, Pretorius’s book marks a shift in the discourse around elephant hunting in South Africa and in environmental consciousness. He introduces a new reason for killing. Pretorius’s campaign against the elephants was not a metaphorical ‘military campaign’, it was a real one. The idea was to vanquish and exterminate an enemy to reduce their numbers and their threat to human welfare and not to take any particular pleasure in doing so. Standing on ladders and injuring oneself on spiny vegetation in the quest of elephants in the Addo thicket was not enjoyable by any standard. Then too, unlike Harris or Cumming, Pretorius was a paid government official, in the contractual employ of the province. Hunting the Addo elephant was, for the first time, placed in the same category as vermin hunting. It was designed only to reduce elephant numbers and to prevent human-elephant contact: it was done neither for sport nor for ivory but was a calculated culling programme. It did not even produce the scientific data which might, at least, have been a useful byproduct of the virtual extermination of a species that, in Pretorius’s words, ‘had held undisputed sway in that bush for thousands of years’ (Pretorius 1948: 210).

### *THE 1960s*

By the end of the Second World War, apart from the government-sponsored extermination of the Addo elephant herd, there had been a hiatus of nearly 50 years in elephant hunting in South Africa. The intervening period had witnessed the evolution of a tradition of wildlife viewing in the country’s national parks, in particular the Kruger National Park which had become a premier tourist attraction (Carruthers 1995b). By 1950, therefore, the South African public, both black and white, had long ceased ivory extraction or elephant hunting.



### **ELEPHANT NUMBERS IN KNP 1905-1967**

As outlined above, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Kruger National Park area contained a couple of individual elephants in the Olifants River gorge on the Mozambique border. However, under conditions of strict preservation on the South African side, their numbers increased and, augmented by immigration from Mozambique along the Crocodile River, they spread throughout the part. In 1905 it was estimated that there were ten elephants in the reserve, by 1925 one hundred, by 1936 two hundred and fifty, 450 by 1946 and one thousand in 1956. A helicopter count a decade later (1967) gave a confirmed number of 6 586 (Whyte et al 2003; Ebedes *et al.* 1991).

Until after the Second World War the management philosophy of South African wildlife conservation was to leave 'nature' alone to achieve or regain a 'balance'. After the war, for a number of reasons – including the retirement of the long-standing warden who believed that nature would manage itself, a change of government in 1948 and the increasing influence of ecology and wildlife biology – the South African national parks organization (then called the National Parks Board) employed a growing number of university trained scientists with responsibility to manage the vegetation and wild animals in the park according to scientific lines. Taking their cue from agricultural science (in the absence of any well developed wildlife biology or ecological science) the national park was managed in the same way as an extensive cattle ranch managed, indeed manipulated, for productivity.

### **ELEPHANT AT CONCRETE DAM**

In 1965 the scientists in the Kruger National Park decided to limit the number of elephants to around 7 000, the number they believed was appropriate for the size of the area, and the feeding (approximately 270kg per day) and watering (160l per day) requirements of elephant. By that time a number of surveys had indicated that elephants were damaging the landscape by destroying large trees and changing woody cover and shrub and tree density. There were other factors too, among them intra-specific competition for space by elephants and with other large herbivores and the inability of elephants to extend their range because the Kruger Park was being fenced on all sides.

Elephants were culled regularly in the Kruger National Park for almost thirty years to keep the 'optimum' at around  $>0.37$  elephants/km<sup>2</sup> (Whyte *et al.* 2003). Perhaps not surprisingly, culling did not generate a literary genre, but it *was* written about. The annual reports of the Kruger Park carried details of the elephants that were killed every year (as many as 1 846 in 1970 and as few as 16 in 1981 – from 1967 to 1997 some 14 629 in total (Whyte, Van Aarde & Pimm 2003)). Culling actually led to improvements in census and tracking techniques, in the operation of darting and drugs and generated some elephant population and behavioural studies.

### HELICOPTER COUNTING

Family groups of elephants were mustered by helicopters, sedated by darting from the air, and killed quickly with well aimed bullets by teams on the ground. The byproducts of the culled elephants were not wasted.

### CULLING SCENE

The carcasses were then loaded onto trucks and taken to an abattoir near (but not within sight of) the Skukuza tourist camp in the Kruger Park that processed, canned and dried thousands of culled elephant, buffalo and hippopotamus each year (Meiring 1976:102), much of it used for rations for national park employees and some nearby mines. The ivory was extracted and sold until this became illegal.

### RICHARD LEAKEY

In the 1970s East African conservationist Richard Leakey was shown this abattoir and exclaimed, 'I watched for a while impressed by the size and scale of the operation, but appalled that this was what wildlife "management" in the late twentieth century had come to' (quoted in Nell 2003). As far as he was concerned, 'wild' or 'pristine' Africa had been stripped of ideals and aesthetic values: it had become a modern, industrial farm, based on an ideology of killing for sustainable utilization and maximum production.

### JEREMY GAVRON

In his book *The last elephant: An African quest* journalist Jeremy Gavron was similarly outraged by sustainable utilization. Believing that 'the elephant is an important representative of the old Africa' (Gavron 1993:xii) abhorred this philosophy of wildlife management, which he called the 'warthog-stroganoff approach to conservation'. He compared the Kruger Park unfavourably with the parks of East Africa where the landscape and the animals were still 'wild'. He described the Kruger Park, with its high fences and good roads as too manicured, almost a Disneyland, run on accounting principles (counting numbers) and mass harvesting for profit (Gavron 1993:132-134).

### PIET MEIRING

Local South African writers on the Kruger National Park approached their subject from another perspective. One of the most prolific (he had ties to the Kruger Park and government structures) was journalist Piet Meiring. Among his popular books were *Behind the scenes in Kruger Park* (1982) and *Kruger Park saga* (1976). Meiring experienced the Kruger National Park differently from Leakey or Garvon, extolling it as an example of 'untouched nature', 'nature's paradise', a place that brings the 'public closer to nature'. Meiring quoted the then Warden of the park, Dr U. de V. Pienaar, as saying that 'we want all nature lovers to become part of its blessed atmosphere' (Meiring 1982:68-69). Meiring seems oblivious to the irony of his support of 'the principle of culling and control' to maintain the 'correct population balance' which he describes in this paradisiacal landscape less than ten pages later (Meiring 1982:77). He admits that this 'necessary' culling is unpopular with the public

## WILDERNESS

and that game rangers abhor having to kill elephants, but ‘without such control measures the game reserve would soon degenerate into a desolate wilderness’ (Meiring 1982:86). This is language reminiscent of Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*: ‘If paradise was early man’s greatest good, wilderness, as its antipode, was his greatest evil. In one condition the environment, garden-like, ministered to his every desire. In the other it was at best indifferent, frequently dangerous, and always beyond control’ (Nash 1982:9).

## DE VOS, BENGIS AND COETZEE

Paper presented by the veterinarians who were actually responsible for doing culling is chilling because its language is so unemotional. Culled animals are described as having been ‘removed’; the humane killing methods are described with detachment and the abattoir processing is outlined in a technical diagram (De Vos et al 1983). One cannot help but recall Cummings’s detachment in describing his putting bullet after bullet into one of the elephants that he was in the process of killing. It would be tempting – but it is outside the scope of this paper – to investigate the connection between the culling discourse and the discourse of apartheid in this period in South African history.

The link has, of course, been made. In March 2008, when the South African government reintroduced the possibility of culling elephant, a spokesman for Animal Rights Africa is quoted in a newspaper as saying, ‘The formulation of the government’s policy on elephant management, specifically with regard to culling, has been driven by the rampant chauvinistic mindset of utilization that is deeply rooted in colonialism and apartheid, which disregards the inherent value of each individual elephant and commodifies them into unfeeling units purely to be assessed for their recreational and economic value’ (Momborg 2008).

## KRUGER WARDEN TOL PIENAAR

Using the language of science and certainty, at a conference on managing large mammals in African conservation areas in 1982, Kruger's warden defended his command-and-control model as the 'pragmatic/economic alternative'. *Laissez faire*, or non-intervention, as was generally practiced in East Africa (see Neumann 1998), Pienaar warned, was conservation management that was 'impractical, fraught with danger, inherently untidy and can have unpredictable and even shocking consequences' (Pienaar 1983:23). In this regard, he may well have been referring to what had happened in Tsavo National Park when elephant numbers were unchecked and in a serious drought they subsequently plummeted with devastating results to the elephants and to the landscape.

In defending his utilitarian culling management strategies, Pienaar quoted the United States model, including Aldo Leopold, the 1916 Act that created the United States's National Parks Service, and the First World Conference on National Parks held in Seattle in 1962. He also defended taking manipulative action because southern Africa was no longer 'wild', conservation areas were relatively small, fenced and directly influenced by human activity. Stability, maintaining the climax ecosystem was, he believed, the key to maintaining a semblance of 'the natural'. This was achieved by providing wildlife with water, ensuring a regular supply of grazing through a veld burning regime, monitoring and then regulating wildlife populations and controlling predators. Moreover, the economic alternative was ethical in Pienaar's perspective because it integrated national parks within the economy and ensured that culling was not wasteful of the lives that had been taken

Pienaar set out his philosophy before the 1982 conference passionately and defended his actions logically. As Adams and McShane (1992:100) assert, scientists often have a similar paranoia and fervour as do writers of 'literature'. Others would strongly disagree. Eminent conservationist Richard Bell has argued that until both Africa and nature conservation are divested of fantasy and 'romanticism', the killing of animals will continue unabated. Only when wild animals have an economic value (as is in the case in Asia) will their future be secured (Adams & McShane 1996:101). Given the continued unsustainable poaching of elephants, as done in East Africa – dead elephants produce ivory – this argument is not entirely convincing.

## CURRENT ELEPHANT NUMBERS

In 2001 Martin Meredith published his book *Elephant destiny: Biography of an endangered species in Africa*. As previously discussed, Africa is a large and diverse continent in which generalizing is difficult, usually impossible. Certainly, in many parts of Africa elephants are indeed endangered, but not in southern Africa. This region has the largest number of elephants in Africa and accounts for 39 per cent of the total range area. By comparison, Central Africa has 29 per cent, East Africa 26 per cent and West Africa 5 per cent (Blanc *et al.* 2007). In 1900 elephant numbers in southern Africa were close to zero. It is estimated that today there are approximately 300 000, viz., over 100 000 in Zimbabwe, 130 000 in Botswana, between 14 000 and 20 000 in Mozambique; 12 000 in Namibia and around 20 000 in South Africa (Blanc *et al.* 2007:112, 114).

## ENDING CULLING

This growth has occurred because of a combination of proclaiming and fencing national parks that contain elephants, natural elephant population growth, the establishment or expansion of new national parks and other protected areas, both private and state-owned, that have been stocked with elephants (many of them translocated from the Kruger National Park) and trans-border immigration of elephants in the region.

The burgeoning numbers of elephant have become a matter of local and international concern. In 1994 elephant culling ceased in South Africa's national parks. There were three principal reasons for this decision. At the time of the transition to democracy in South Africa that year and an appreciation that the new government would be strapped for cash to invest in national parks, there was a need to find external sources of funding. This was forthcoming from IFAW (R5 million in 1994) but only if culling was ended. Second, there were accusations that the scientific evidence in favour of culling was deficient and third, a new management paradigm (adaptive management) was advocated in international conservation biology circles as a preferred alternative to command-and-control (Page, Slotow & Van Aarde 2006). Although since 1994, when culling terminated, evidence of elephant overpopulation in terms of landscape alterations (about which tourists complain) and possible biodiversity losses have become apparent, the government of South Africa has stalled on re-introducing culling, particularly fearful of condemnation by the international community when South Africa was the host of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) and the World Parks Congress (2003). Moreover, new conservation legislation has been under consideration during this time, viz. the Biodiversity Act No 10 of 2004 and Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003 (Carruthers *et al.* in press; SANParks 2006; Whyte *et al.* 1999).

Since culling ended, the Kruger elephant population has increased by about 1 000 every year. They now total around 15 000 or 16 000, and there are about 500 elephants in the Addo national park. As their detrimental impact on the landscape is incontestable the way forward has to be formulated.

### **ELEPHANT MANAGEMENT: STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT**

A number of initiatives have included public participation in assisting government in deciding what to do (Ledger & Magome 2004; SANParks n.d.). After many meetings, concept management plans and scientific round tables, in March 2008 the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism announced the final proclamation of the *Norms and standards for the management of elephants in South Africa* (Republic of South Africa n.d.) and the publication of R.J. Scholes and K.G. Minnell (eds) *Assessment of South African elephant management* is imminent. The discourse in the *Norms and standards* reads like a government gazette, but it enshrines the responsibilities that South African humans have towards elephants and enforces certain rights for elephants.

Active public participation and interdisciplinary debate managing and hunting elephants have thus been in the forefront of South Africa's animal politics over the past decade. To some extent, the rhetoric of animal rights has become more strident, scientists have become less arrogant, perhaps even more hesitant in explaining the limits of their knowledge, while rural African communities have demanded a say in the matter in order to ensure that if culling occurs, they will derive financial benefit.

### **NEW BOOKS, E.G. ETHICS, MEREDITH ETC.**

The discourses used by all parties in the debates described above have been polarizing and become embodied in lobby groups and ideological perspectives that aspire to hegemony (Fakir 2004). Scientists bewail the possible loss of biodiversity if elephant numbers increase to the point of habitat destruction. Animal rights advocates allude to Nazi tactics and refer to 'genocide' (Momborg 2008) and the 'final solution' (Connor 2008).

### **CARTOON RE CULLING AND POPULATION EXPLOSION**

Nobel Prize winning chemist Paul Crutzen (2002) has christened our era the 'age of the anthropocene' because human actions have long-term and permanent effects on planet earth. How humanity treats its elephants could, from a literary point of view, become a metaphor for how humanity regards itself as a species at this critical time. Descriptions of how elephants – an intelligent animal that shares many characteristics with humans – have overpopulated the areas to which they are confined to the extent of destroying their habitat, water and food supply, reducing biodiversity and behaving 'unnaturally', may be masking a conversation that humans are having with one another about their own population dynamics and depredations to the earth.

### COVER OF ELEPHANTOMS

A core question that could be elucidated through literature is the following: what is an elephant and how does it fit into the natural world and how into the various human and cultural worlds? This is a question that one recent book does confront. In 2002 Lyall Watson, a South African ethologist and biologist with an interest in the supernatural, wrote *Elephantoms: Tracking the elephant*. It returns to the theme that I discussed in my first example, i.e. San knowledge of elephant biology and the convergence of scientific and pre-colonial ideas around elephant communication and specific patterns of elephant society and behaviour.

Watson's is an innovative exploration of elephants in South Africa, like many other books about elephant, autobiographically based and recounting anecdote and adventure. But Watson inserts science, imagination and history into his personal journey of discovering elephants. The blurring of fact, fiction, imagination and exaggeration is suggestive of the hunting literature, such as that by Harris and Cumming, but also by the work of Pretorius and a scientist such as Pienaar. Watson avoids becoming embroiled in the culling debate by situating his story along the Cape coast, a specific location in which culling is not an issue because elephants are merely too few – phantoms in fact (see Roberts *et al.* 2008). Watson's book is worth noting, for he suggests that emotion, history, experience, science and all the other ways of knowing, all find a place in the human-elephant encounter. He has tried to bring together the languages and knowledges of indigenous South Africans, hunters and scientists and weave them into an appreciation of a species.

### ELEPHANT SILHOUETTE AND ALEXANDER POPE QUOTATION

As Alexander Pope expressed it: 'The proper study of mankind is man, but when one regards the elephant, one wonders' (from *An essay on man*, 1734, quoted by Watson 2003:60).

In analyzing the works above, I hope that I have conveyed the plethora of voices and variety of discourses that elephants have generated and the environmental questions and dilemmas that they have raised. They have ranged from the hostile to the sympathetic, from the economic to the ethical, from the factual to the fictional. They have encompassed a gamut of human responses over the past 150 years, ranging from the romantic, the reverent, to careful research and a discussion about rights.