



Photographer: Robert J. Ross
Interview by Zan Boag

The last wild places

Zan Boag: *You spent four years taking photographs of the area in Tanzania known as the Selous – can you tell me about your time in the reserve?*

Robert J. Ross: A couple of friends of mine had taken one of the hunting blocks and converted it to photographic tourism and I had commissions to write a couple of magazine articles about how it was all working. My plan was to go for ten days and go back to Cape Town and write a couple of magazine stories and move on – even though I'd always wanted to go to the Selous, it's one of the storied protected areas in Africa. It's larger than Switzerland and most people don't know that it's there. Tanzania's incredibly famous for its wildlife – you have the Serengeti, the Ngorongoro Crater, Tarangire – but that's all up in the north and the Selous is in the southern part of the country, so most people just miss it.

This project must have transformed the way you perceived the wilderness.

Over the four-year period I spent about a year's worth of days in the game reserve. Spending that much time

there you get to recognise patterns in nature – you spend enough time in a particular area and you get to know a group of animals. In one area there was a coalition of six young adult male lions, with three brothers and three others who joined them. They had developed this skill for buffalo hunting, every two to three days they would be hammering a big buffalo – you just knew that if you spent enough time following them, getting out in the morning and finding them, that if they hadn't eaten for a couple of days you'd find them either hunting, or with a buffalo. Pretty amazing to have the opportunity to start to see the cycles and patterns.

If we keep behaving the way we're behaving, nobody's going to be able to see this at all.

No, it's going to disappear.

Some see this as a disaster, but others question: Why are these animals worth protecting?

It's not the right of humans to take all these creatures to the brink of, or into, extinction. There's been a

natural evolution for thousands of years and some have disappeared and others have evolved, over long periods of time. But humans, over the last 100 years, and in particular over the past 50 years and even 20 years, have massively accelerated that process. I would have no problem if the people living in that area, with poison arrows, were taking down the occasional elephant or antelope for food, but to be shooting thousands of elephants a year for decoration – carvings and chopsticks and billiard balls in middle-class homes – is just not an appropriate use of that sort of natural resource. Using it in that way is going to make it impossible for our children and grandchildren to ever see that.

The destruction of nature for short-term gain is a common theme in the 21st century. How will future generations judge those living in the early 21st century? How will our grandchildren and great-grandchildren judge what we are currently doing to the environment?

The cynical answer to that is that they may be evolving into people who care even less than we do, so they



may not judge us badly. I certainly hope I'm wrong on that. The thing is that the scale differential has changed so much – until 150 years ago there wasn't the same ability to destroy. We have a major obligation to protect what is there for future generations, which is summed up by a quote in my book from Julius Nyerere, the first President of independent Tanzania, in 1961:

“The survival of our wildlife is a matter of grave concern for all of us in Africa. These wild creatures amid the wild places they inhabit are not only important as a source of wonder and inspiration, but are an integral part of our natural resources and our future livelihood and wellbeing. In accepting the trusteeship of our wildlife we solemnly declare that we will do everything in our power to make sure that our children's grandchildren will be able to enjoy this rich and precious inheritance.”

The question is, what are we doing about it? It's not heading in a positive direction at the moment, and this doesn't just apply to the Selous, but on a broader scale right across the Earth, we seem to be on a path of destruction, with extinction rates from 100 to 1,000 times higher than background extinction rates. What can be done to stop this trend?

That was my primary goal with this book – because the Selous is so little known. Once completed I have been able to put this book in front of people – both influential and ordinary folks – and wow them with what's there; and hopefully motivate them to look after the area better than it has been looked after in recent years. At the book launch in Dar es Salaam I met with the new Minister for Natural Resources and Tourism and he was thrilled with it. We talked about trying to get a meeting with the President to show him the book and say, hey, isn't

this something important to preserve for Tanzanians and for the world, but that hasn't happened yet.

All the work done by conservationists can be undone in an instant by a political leader who is focused on 'growth', on this notion of progress that seems to permeate contemporary society. All that work can be undone – the problem is that it can't subsequently be wound back.

No, once you pave an area, it's gone for good. Once an animal species is wiped out, it's wiped out. And all of these things have an impact. They're already feeling the impact in the Selous. I talked with some of the people who have been there a long time. People who have run hunting groups there say that parts of their areas that were somewhat open – well, because the elephants are disappearing those areas are turning into thicket. And that's making it impossi-

ble for some of the grazing animals to get through those areas. And far fewer elephants there during the dry season – there are a number of illustrations of this in my book – the elephants go into the dry river beds and one, they remember, and two, they have the brain power to know what they’re doing, and three, they have the strength to actually dig in these dry river beds and open up areas of fresh water flowing underground. They’ll dig a big hole, they’ll drink for a while, then they’ll move on and they might come back a day or so later, and in the meantime the antelope species, the birds, the bees, the other insects, the snakes, come to those holes to drink. So, if the elephants aren’t there to dig the holes, those areas become uninhabitable during the dry season.

You talk about putting this book together to highlight to others the importance

of protecting wild places. The New York Review of Books *wrote about this, saying that your book is “a record of what is at stake, a set of portraits of the extraordinary wildlife we are losing.” We are undoubtedly the cause of this loss. Is it possible for us to switch from this role of being the destroyer to being the protector?*

It’s possible, but I don’t know if the will is there. I would love to think so, and there are lots of people trying very hard to protect areas like the Selous and lots of other places in Africa and around the world. But is there the will to do that on a long-term basis? In the Selous, there’s very low population density and it’s lousy farming land and there are tsetse flies – thankfully – so that keeps cattle out of there. They did carve out a corner of the reserve when uranium was found there and there have been at various times other exploration permits given. If the economics got so great that

the oil or gas or uranium – and there are rumours of an even larger uranium reserve smack in the middle of the game reserve – if any of that became viable you could easily see the government turning their back on preserving an area like this. At this point it’s probably one of the largest uninhabited chunks of land left in Africa.

When you were taking these photographs, did you feel like you were taking these for posterity’s sake – that this was something that would pass, that would at some stage in the near future cease to exist?

I made that exact point at the book launch at Dar es Salaam, I said that I had done this book as a tool to motivate the powers that be to protect this area and save it for future generations. If it proves over time to have become a record of what once was, I’ll consider what I did to be a complete failure. ▣











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