

The Untouchable Wild

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Are today's eco-trips really better for Africa's habitat than the shooting parties of Hemingway's era? We may have traded guns for cameras, but the essence of the safari is still the same: a hunt for the heart of the wild.

Olng'anaiyo . . . Kipurses . . . Orkerri . . . Oloibortoto . . . Oloitokitok . . . Entasekera. Across plain and jungle and escarpment, we walked through the places of Masailand, the giraffes rocking through the tawny grass with impalas leaping before them, the lions coughing around our tents in the dawn. We walked the week down, sun by orange sun, passing by the mud huts of the Masai, where the young men watched us steadily from a distance, legs crossed, crimson shawls wrapped around their shoulders, cradling their spears like lovers, and coming to squat by our fire at dusk. They called me chui, "leopard," for my freckles, and my friend Glenn simba, "lion," for his blond hair. With voices like calling birds, they taught us a prayer under the heavy stars: Engai tajapaki tooinaipuko inono, "God shield me with your wings."

Like so many who journey to Africa, we had come to live in an imagined past, when the worlds of animals and humans overlapped, when the voices of the two were one. Because Kenya ended safari hunting in 1977, and because we were born in a time when people had begun to question

the sport, each of us carried nothing but a walking stick -- to swish the grass before us, letting the mambas and other snakes know that we were approaching -- and a Swiss Army knife, not much of a weapon to deter a Cape buffalo. Instead, we used our hands, clapping loudly on the forested trails. It was hardly a traditional safari, but it was very much in the tradition of civilized people trying to get close to a place when time was young and each of us experienced the hairy feel and musky smell of wildlife. We did not have the one primal encounter the old safari hunters knew best: We never touched a wild animal.

Papa Hemingway, that unabashed fan of virile heroes and death in the afternoon, touched most of them: the smooth nap of zebra, the corrugated hide of rhino, and the dreadlock mane of lion. After slaying a lion, he ate a chunk of its flesh raw -- courage incarnate. He also shot a varied bag of eland, gazelle, hyena, buffalo, leopard -- the savanna-esque equivalent of today's computer games: The targets pop up, the hunters shoot them down. He killed far more meat than the camp could consume and without the compelling necessity of the Masai, whom he admired and whose families and livestock were sometimes torn to bits by the king of beasts. Like safari hunters who preceded him, Hemingway found a smorgasbord of primeval mystery in Africa. How

could he have resisted filling his plate, especially when quite a bit more was going on than simply wanting to touch and taste the wild?

Hemingway was born on July 21, 1899, at the tail end of an era that considered the world to be its playing field. Queen Victoria, who saw the Union Jack unfurled over the farthest corners of the earth, died in 1901, when Hemingway was one. When Hemingway was 11, Theodore Roosevelt -- who had presided over the military expansion of the United States -- published *African Game Trails*, the account of his yearlong safari to Africa to collect specimens for the Smithsonian. Imperialism was in the air, and social Darwinism gave it a modern, scientific underpinning, turning the world into a cricket field where the team endowed with the most intelligence, money, and arms won. In the case of safari hunting, the batsmen were armed with rifles and the animals with their senses, their speed, and their teeth and claws. Since the batsmen sometimes lost, it was considered an even game.

It wasn't, of course. Coddled by their staff, safari hunters were insulated from the realities of the bush -- weariness, hunger, and thirst -- and, backed up by the skill and firepower of their white hunters, they rarely faced danger alone. No matter. When Britain lost its empire and the United States took over policing the planet after World War II, American sportsmen, flush with disposable income and copies of Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa*, filled the niche that the British had vacated, making pilgrimages to Kenya and Tanganyika, to South Africa and Rhodesia. The recent first ascents of Annapurna and Everest were in the back of their minds, and in their hearts a paraphrase of Aldo Leopold, even if they had never read the man: "The trophy, whether it be a bird's egg, a mess of trout, a basket of mushrooms, the photograph of a

bear, the pressed specimen of a wild flower, or a note tucked into the cairn on a mountain peak, is a certificate. It attests that its owner has been somewhere and done something -- that he has exercised skill, persistence, or discrimination in the age-old feat of overcoming, outwitting, or reducing-to-possession. These connotations which attach to the trophy usually far exceed its physical value." For many of us, there wasn't (and still isn't) any place with more connotations about the time when humans and wildlife were one than Africa. It's where the animals are the biggest and the most plentiful; it's where the light is sensuous and clarifying; it's where the earliest humanoid bones have been found. Getting that certificate is why I walked through Masailand; it's why thousands of tourists travel annually to the Serengeti to watch wildlife; it's why hunters still journey to Africa with rifles.

This is an uneasy sharing, though -- some people watching wildlife and others killing it, often within a few miles of each other, and especially given the backdrop of the worldwide loss of biodiversity and the rash of legislation designed to conserve nature: the Wilderness and Endangered Species acts, cites (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), and the suspension of commercial whaling. Against such a tableau, many nonhunting African tourists find it hard to condone shooting lions and elephants for sport.

Yet across sub-Saharan Africa, safari hunting continues to flourish alongside wildlife viewing, and many African conservationists see both activities as contributing to the sustainable economic development of nations in which the annual per capita income is perhaps \$500. Rural-empowerment programs such as Zimbabwe's campfire (Communal Areas Management Programme for

Indigenous Resources) and Namibia's life (Living In a Finite Environment) have tried to involve communities in wildlife conservation by having them manage wildlife -- an option taken away during colonial times. If wildlife has long-term economic value to rural people, goes the reasoning, they will protect it, not poach it. In some regions of Zimbabwe and Namibia the scheme has worked. Using the income generated from a mixture of safari hunting and wildlife viewing, communities have built schools, drilled wells, trained people in the skills necessary to survive in a cash economy, and also maintained some of their hunter-gatherer lifestyle while adopting some of the principles that are used to manage wildlife sustainably in North America. Often the hunting components of the programs are designed for regions where thick brush makes wildlife viewing and photography impractical. Not everywhere in Africa looks like the plains beneath the snows of Kilimanjaro.

Needless to say, using wildlife in this fashion disturbs some of us who differentiate between domestic animals and wild ones, preferring to eat the former and photograph the latter. Kenya has capitalized richly on such sentiments; wildlife viewing, the country's second-largest earner of foreign exchange after agriculture, contributes \$400 million annually to the economy. When I asked Richard Leakey, the director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, if Kenya might consider adopting the southern African conservation strategies, which incorporate safari hunting, he said that doing so would be very unlikely. "Wildlife viewing brings such enormous revenue to the country that the negative effects of hunting would far outweigh any of its gains," he explained. "Campfire money has been made largely from hunting elephants, and there is an international lobby that believes elephants are a

sentient, thinking species, like whales or the great apes. This lobby is well funded and vociferous, and opening up such hunting in Kenya would be counterproductive."

Leakey's pragmatic response doesn't address the question that interests so many of us: Who occupies the higher moral ground, hunters or photographers? For those who believe that animals should be killed only for essential ends, food most notably, a safari on which half a dozen species are killed for trophies seems self-indulgent, especially given the fact that a single eland or kudu can feed a person for weeks, and animals like lions, symbolic bites of them aside, are not eaten at all.

Lest the photographers grow smug, it should be noted that no cradle-to-grave studies of the ecological costs of ecotourism exist. Nonconsumptive wildlife viewing is highly consumptive of fossil fuel, water, and wildlife habitat, which is converted into agricultural land to grow the produce and the domestic meat that tourists demand when they stay in four-star lodges or well-appointed tent camps. A few safari hunters, killing several elephants in some brushy backwoods corner and paying a high license fee for each animal, may put more money into a local community (\$7,350 per elephant in one district of Zimbabwe, for instance) and do less damage to the ecosystem as a whole than if a permanent lodge were constructed there. This is not a comforting thought for those of us who see ecotourism as the panacea for the developing world's conservation problems.

Comparing the overall ecological effects of hunting with those of photography is an important discussion -- one that will no doubt receive scholarly study in the years to come. In leading us to believe that one or the other of these pursuits may emerge victorious, however, the

debate obscures a more fundamental dilemma: our inability to get intimately close to wild animals no matter what means we use. Most hunters and photographers take issue with this premise. The hunters say that they indisputably touch the beast, often eating it in an animistic version of Christian transubstantiation, wild flesh being transformed into knowledge of primal mystery. The photographers and viewers, on the other hand, claim immersion in an Eden-like state of nature before the invention of the gun, the bow, and the spear, when humans were still fruit eaters and animals were innocent of harm.

Both are myths born of our profound and eternal isolation from most animals. We caress our dogs and cats, and mahouts ride and pet their domesticated elephants, but only a wild elephant can ever really know the touch of another wild elephant: the swish of ears, the soothing rub of flank against flank, the comfort of trunk on trunk. We long for intimacy with the wild, yet are held away by wildness itself.

Once, however, I did get very close. I was working in South Africa's Kruger National Park on an elephant birth-control project designed to replace culling and keep the park's growing elephant population within the capacity of its habitat. We had immobilized an elephant with tranquilizer darts so as to change her radio collar and give her a booster shot of an experimental immunocontraceptive vaccine. She lay before us, her gently respiring flank high as my chest. Her tusks were short, blunt, and smooth, and were stained on their ends. I circled her slowly. The sparse hairs on her tail were the diameter of baling wire and black as anthracite, her skin wrinkled in deep fissures, making her seem five times as old as her 15 years. Her ears were frondlike, filled with the dendritic

tunnels of blood vessels, a faint dark red under the translucent skin, warm to the touch, and pulsing deeply and regularly with the surf of her heart. Periodically, she exhaled with a rumbling snore. I laid my hand on her cheek and traced the dusty whirls that led to her eyebrows, which were long and alluring. Her bark-colored eyes were small for such a huge being, and seemed preternaturally wise, akin to a dog's or a human's.

It was as close as I ever got to touching a live wild animal in Africa, though in retrospect I have seen it as a less than satisfactory experience, like getting someone drunk and taking advantage of her. But there appears to be no other way to cross the species barrier and entreat an elephant for a caress, or lie down with a lion, and have the animal walk away and live, or have yourself do the same. Hunting . . . photography . . . darting -- each fails in its own way. The wild beast remains aloof, and try as we might, we can only get so close and step no further.