

POACHING ON THE KRUGER BOUNDARY

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In 1938, when I took over the Sibasa reserve on the borders of the Kruger National Park, I found that professional native poachers had established their kraals and lands all along and just outside its boundary. There were miles of cultivated lands, all with massive bush fences. In these, gaps were left at intervals of five to twenty yards, and in every gap was placed a steel wire snare. During the night when all was quiet the animals would leave the park to raid the native lands. Sometimes the poachers' catch would be so great that the snared animals could not be dealt with before the vulture and hyaenas had completely devoured the carcasses. The wanton waste was terrific.

Among the main culprits were the native chiefs, so I recommended to our Department a scheme to remove all natives from near the game reserve boundary, placing them in suitable settlement where their land and kraal sites could be properly controlled. This scheme would also remove them from the river bank areas and put a stop to cultivation along the river beds and banks. This practice in the native reserve had caused the northern part of the Park to lose some of its best waters; even the bigger rivers were fast becoming dry, sandy, silted and waterless. The schools of hippos in some places had disappeared. The kraals and arable areas to form the settlements, were to be placed where the ground was fertile but where erosion could not take place and a native ranger was to be put at each settlement.

Five years later I got the order to go ahead. The natives were up in arms and threatened to kill me and my staff, but we survived, though we were sometimes badly assaulted.

After several years of tactful endeavour, the natives, who in one season had lost 10,000 cattle through drought, saw their desert lands return to bush and grass and the water come back to their springs and river pools. Whereas their women had had to travel five or more miles to obtain a head load of water, now it could be got close by. Then they backed the scheme wholeheartedly.

I do not intend to imply that poaching immediately ceased; it will never cease while there are Africans in game country, but it did put a stop to the wholesale slaughter. Some poachers were never tamed—dangerous men, who would not hesitate to kill

rather than be captured. Some owned guns which they kept hidden in caves or hollow trees.

Many of the chiefs and ndumas were allowed guns and ammunition to destroy vermin. Of course these were used mainly for poaching and were lent out to hunter-poachers who had to supply dried meat in payment for them. Early in the Second World War the guns were called in. Many poachers did not surrender theirs, but settled in the wildest parts where no police or white men ever went. These were the dangerous men. They could always procure some ammunition through the head-man, who often got supplies from European poachers. They were able to buy as much steel wire as they wanted from workers returning from the gold mines, who had stolen lengths of cable.

In putting a stop to poaching, these professionals were my greatest problem. Of my 33 rangers only one or two would tackle them unless I was there, and often this took days of marching through the thick bush. We would locate the poachers' camp and pounce upon them at night. Many would escape by crossing the Limpopo river into Rhodesian or Portuguese territory. Some would remain away for good, others would return after a year or two. We always kept a strict watch on their old haunts and occasionally were fortunate enough to catch them.

When hunting these men in the wildest parts, I often came across miles of bush fences set with snares. Sometimes these would span a huge hill and would catch whole herds of sable and other antelope as they approached the water hole. Favourite places of operation were isolated water holes or pans, in the late winter season, when water was scarce and the animals gathered in quantities. Here the entire place would be encircled by bush fences set with snares.

Even to-day tens of thousands of game of all description are snared yearly as they leave the Kruger to roam about the native territory at night. It is three years since I left the district but I am told that in some parts snaring is rife once more. Not all officials are opposed to native poaching in these outer Districts.