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7/24/15

GLS 317: Development, Genocide,
and Nature Conservation in Namibia

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The Interaction of Conservation and Tourism in Etosha: A Process of Change

First visited by Europeans in 1851, Namutoni and Okakuejo were originally the northernmost outposts of the German colonial attempt to control South West Africa.¹ They were the physical incarnation of the more ethereal “red line” above which the Germans neither occupied nor influenced, despite significant efforts to the contrary². In 1897, in response to a devastating outbreak of the livestock disease known as rinderpest, the two locales were used to shoot any animal that passed south from Ovamboland.³ By 1903, a manned military fort was constructed at Namutoni and Okakuejo.⁴ Over the following century, these outposts would see a remote landscape transform from the mostly ignored Game Reserve 2 to the

¹ Olivier, Willie. *African Adventurer's Guide to Namibia*. Cape Town: Struik, 2006. Print.

² Wallace, Marion, and John Kinahan. *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. Print.

³ "Namibia History. The Battle of Fort Namutoni at Etosha on 28 January 1905." *Schutztruppe German South West Africa Fort Namutoni Northern Outpost Schutztruppe*. Namibia-1on1, 2013. Web. 18 July 2015.

⁴ Wallace, Marion, and John Kinahan. *A History of Namibia: From the Beginning to 1990*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. Print.

internationally recognized Etosha National Park, which attracts thousands of tourists every year. The transformation would be gradual at first, but soon the Vast White Place was a thriving agent of tourism income. Through a historical analysis of the park, the conflict and eventual cooperation between conservation and tourism can be seen as a three-part saga. First, the era of small management and local relationships ran from the park's establishment in 1907 to the 1950s. In the 1950s, a critical change in the park occurred, pushing it towards a greater investment in tourism. Finally, recently, there is evidence that the two goals of the park are beginning to cooperate harmoniously.

The history of Etosha is most easily viewed through infrastructure. Infrastructure is not a representation of man overcoming nature; instead, it is best viewed as a temporary investment that can at any time be reclaimed by nature. Through the lens of Emmanuel Kreike's *Environmental Infrastructure*, Etosha National Park is an evident case of investment in infrastructure and the dynamic processes that occur as a result of these investments, or lack thereof.⁵ The consequences of these investments can be reviewed historically, as well as examined as they stand currently.

⁵ Kreike, Emmanuel. *Environmental Infrastructure in African History: Examining the Myth of Natural Resource Management in Namibia*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Both tourism and conservation necessitated infrastructure, though of different kinds. In both cases, a continuous investment in labor was necessary in order to make the infrastructure effective.

An excellent example of conservation investment is the drilling of bore holes throughout the park for game to drink at during the dry season. Before the 1950s, these man-made watering holes were concrete pits with steep sides, varying in size from 7 to 15 meters long, and fed by a single borehole. All types of game frequented the holes, but it was not uncommon for elephants, giraffes, and wildebeests to fall into the pits and die, ruining the water supply. What's more, larger animals could often not drink from the pools of water when levels dropped too low.⁶ In the late 1940s, the administration began to fund the replacement of these watering holes with safer, more effective ones.⁷ The investment was significant, but considered a worthwhile one at the time because water was what kept game in the park.⁸

Camps and roads were the primary, though by no means the only, form of tourism infrastructure. By 1957, about 7000 tourists visited the park annually.⁹ This was a ten-fold increase from the 701 visitors at Namutoni one decade earlier in 1947.¹⁰ It was about this time that decisions had to be made regarding tourist facilities at both Namutoni and Okakuejo. In 1948, it was recommended to build

⁶ NAN, NAO 20, Annual Reports 1947-1953.

⁷ NAN, PB/1718, Provision of Water in Etosha National Park 1959.

⁸ NAN, PB/3742, Biologists Report April 1st 1959 to March 31st 1960.

⁹ NAN, SWAA 2335, A511/3, Imprest Account Namutoni 1950-1958.

¹⁰ NAN, NAO 067, Game Okukueyo and Namutoni Reports: Game Reserve and Facilities for Tourists 1947-1954.

facilities for 50 people both at Namutoni and Okakueyo. Provisions were made for hot water showers, and two Africans were hired for each camp to maintain them.¹¹ A local man of German descent, Mr. J Roelofse proposed to build a tourist's concession store and restaurant, which would become the first of its kind in the park. Mr. Roelofse even went so far as to humbly submit himself for the self-created post of Superintendent of Tourists in South West Africa, but was turned down by the administration who decided "At present, there was is no need for the post."¹² The power within the park would remain in the hands of game warden. By 1957 a major effort was in place to improve and construct the over 400 km of roads in the park. ¹³ The early 1950s marked a significant period in the history or Etosha's tourism based environmental infrastructure. It was during this time that the administration began to embrace the idea of tourism in the park, as they began to see the revenue that tourism could bring in. Huge investments in infrastructure followed, at the urging of the Administrator-in-Executive Committee of Etosha as well as the game warden of the era, B.J.G. De La Bat.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² NAN, NAO 067, Game Okakuey and Namutoni Reports: Game Reserve and Facilities for Tourists 1947-1954

¹³ In 1957, one year before the park officially became named Etosha, the road system was being developed extensively. According to the Administrator-in-Executive Committee of Etosha Game Reserve, the roads "should be the responsibility of the Parks authority, planned and routed from the point of view of nature conservation. These serving the public who pay the taxes and levies on petrol for the use of roads should, however, be financed by the central road authority." The justification for the new roads is put on nature conservation, but interestingly, the roads are labeled as public roads open to everyone, including tourists. Private roads built for park staff to improve mobility and the safety of game would have to be funded by the park. NAN, SWAA 2341, A511/15, Game Reserve. Namutoni Rest Camp Tourist Facilities 1953-1959.

¹⁴ Ibid.

And so there were a number of forces that drove the development of environmental infrastructure within the park. These forces changed critically from those of game protection to tourism as the park evolved from the 1920s to the late 1950s. As has been shown, early on there were few tourists, and the game warden would report largely on tribal relations, game numbers and vermin, park relationships with local farmers, and water levels. The relationship with the indigenous Bushmen was one of control and discipline. A typical report might read, “The Bushmen are under control and giving no problems.” Game was tracked, and dry seasons were sourly noted as affecting all kinds of game in the park.¹⁵ Only a small note was added in each monthly report that read, e.g., “Europeans: Plane flown by Col Sir P Ryneveld, Major Meintjes, Mr. Hahn [Native Commissioner Hahn], and a mechanic per plane. Special permit to shoot game.”¹⁶ That month in 1925, only 4 “tourists” visited the park.

However, by the 1950s, the park was transforming into primarily a tourism attraction, especially in the eyes of the administration. This can be seen in a number of manifestations in the late 1950s. In 1958, the name of the park was officially changed from Game Reserve 2 to Etosha Game Reserve, a much more palatable name for visitors. There was also a major dispute over a plan to lay both electrical lines and a water canal, running from north to the south, completely dividing the

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that only cursory notes are made of how the droughts affected the people of Ovamboland or the Bushmen. When it was mentioned, the focus was on the livestock and mules that the Bushmen relied on, rather than the people themselves. Greater focus on natives was, of course, the jurisdiction of the Native Commissioners of Reserves 1 and 3, which were transformed from game reserves to native reserves because there was little outside tourism to help develop these parks. NAN, ADM 5503/1, Game Reserve (Namutoni) Reports 1915-1925.

¹⁶ Ibid.

park.¹⁷ On top of this, a fourth visitor camp at Otjovasandu was planned and executed. ¹⁸ At this time, development was at its height, as the administration gleaned how it might benefit from the natural resources it had at Etosha.

Ulf Dieckmann, a noted evolutionary ecologist, suggests in his 2003 paper “The Impact of Nature Conservation on the San: A Case Study of Etosha” that the motivation for establishing game parks runs deeper than the mere protection of game.¹⁹ The true motivation, he argues, is the protection of valuable colonial resources. Where other nations have pristine forests and valuable minerals to protect, South West Africa decided it had to protect its living resources.

While this may be a valid viewpoint after the 1950s, the investment in the park to protect game largely for tourism and international science was not the original focus of Etosha. At first, game took precedence---as long as the game did not interfere with local farmers and the farmers did not interfere with the local wildlife. In a report from 1925, the game warden stated “A lion killed a cow recently at Namutoni, nature of country made it impossible to track the animal.”²⁰ Here, we see the warden trying to strike an early balance between local European farmers’ needs and the duties of game protection. This type of report was not unique and similar ones could be found as late as the 1940s.²¹ As late as 1948, farmers living on ranches

¹⁷ NAN, BB/1907, The Vast White Place 1998.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ NAN, PB/2117, The Impact of Nature Conservation on the San: A case study of Etosha 2007.

²⁰ NAN, ADM 5503/1 Game Reserve (Namutoni) Reports 1915-1925.

²¹ Ibid.

that bordered the park were allowed to capture and sell wildlife to zoos in Europe and North America.²² Thus even in the Game Reserve, game were viewed as wild creatures that had to be managed alongside local settlers and farmers. Early Game Wardens had few qualms about shooting lions and other “vermin” such as cheetahs, and they often worked in conjunction with local farmers (of European descent) to control wildlife and keep cattle separate from the park. That said, the management of wildlife and the obvious focus on game was the driving force behind Game Reserve 2 until the 1950s.

When there developed sufficient numbers of tourists, the warden’s reports became increasingly focused on facilities. By the 1960s the park had been fenced in, leading to an increase in human management. Now, finally, the “resource” mindset seems more relevant. The increase in human management led to the need for scientific studies, which led to the transformation of game conservation into nature conservation.²³ Suddenly the park could draw international scientists and tourists

²² Such is the interesting case of Mr. Rudolph Boehme. Mr. Boehme bought his farm in 1936 for 1,750.00 pounds on the border of Game Reserve 2. After his purchase, there was debate over how to handle his business and livestock. Permits were granted to allow him to enter and chase livestock, although without weapons. Later, he was required to use a motor vehicle, not pack animals, to move his cream and butter because the mules scared the game. A ranger was even assigned to shoot escaped stock to prevent lung sickness. The boundary of the farm was also debated and set to 5 miles. Mr. Boehme appeared to have a good relationship with park authorities, because they did not view him as a hunter. In fact, he had domesticated zebras and kudu on his farm, which he sold to zoos in Europe and North America for a profit. SWA purchased Farm Onguma, No. 314, from Mr. Boehme in 1948 to round off Etosha Park. NAN, SWAA, 2335 A511/3, Imprest Account Namutoni 1950-1958.

²³ Odendaal, F. H. *Verslag Van Die Kommissie Van Ondersoek Na Aangeleenthede Van Suidwes-Afrika: 1962-1963 = Report of the Commission of Enquiry into South West Africa Affairs: 1962-1963 = Report of the Commission of Enquiry into South West Africa Affairs*. Pretoria: Staatsdrukker, 1964. Print.

alike in an increasingly controlled environment all thanks to the valuable game resources within the park.

Ultimately, it was this shift in human management in the 1950s and 1960s that changed the way the park was viewed by the administration, tourists, environmentalists, and scientists alike. Although the transformation of Etosha national park over the last century was a complicated and dynamic process of change driven by many factors, it was a growth in human management that enabled more and more tourists to visit the park with greater comfort. Like the metaphorical snowball, this initial catalyst would create a rolling process that would continue for the next 40 years unchecked.

A perfect example of park development without heavy tourism investment can be found in the Game Reserves 1 and 3, which were created under the same Ordinance 88 in 1907 as Game Reserve 2. The other two parks have had a very different history from that of Etosha. Early on, the three parks were treated similarly, but soon, the plethora of game in Game Reserve 2 and the need for native lands forced much of Game Reserves 1 and 3 into being declared Native Reserves.²⁴ Little happened on these reserves save for poaching.²⁵ The administration built boreholes only to support outposts, and no major roads were constructed throughout the reserves. Although there were game in these parks, tourism was focused in and around the Etosha Pan and its affiliated watering holes, leaving little

²⁴ Although they were not officially undeclared as Game Reserves, which severely limited the opportunities for hunting and development of the natives who were forced onto the reserve. NAN, BB/1907 The Vast White Place 1998.

²⁵ Ibid.

reason for investments in the game reserves turned native reserves. By the 1950s, any pretense of game preservation in reserves 1 and 3 was lost, and the focus was placed entirely on Etosha.²⁶

Etosha continually balanced its two main purposes like a delicate seesaw; it is unrealistic to say that tourism and conservation did not intimately affect each other. Historically, lion hunting was interrupted so tourists could watch them eat. Twice a week, a dead zebra was tied to a tree and up to five vehicles were allowed to watch as the lion ate its free dinner. In addition, tourists in motorcars would scare animals from watering holes and near collisions were frequent enough to necessitate the rerouting of numerous roads throughout the park.²⁷

This is not to say that the relationship was entirely parasitic. An investment in game infrastructure could sometimes also help tourism. Boreholes near roads help attract wildlife for all to see while keeping game healthy. Checkpoints and fences protected game and helped maintain relatively high populations while keeping wildlife out of farmer's plots. At times, the balance between conservation and tourism was better struck, but in general, subtle shifts in investment and management would push the focus more towards the game park and away from the tourist park, or vice versa. As we have seen, the major tipping point from conservation to tourism in Etosha was in the 1950s.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ NAN, SWAA, 2335 A511/3, Imprest Account Namutoni 1950-1958.

Recently, however, a new trend can be seen emerging in the park. Investment and construction of tourism facilities has slowed dramatically and signs of wear are obvious at the aging Fort Namutoni.²⁸ The tourism has not stopped or even slowed, but there are no plans for future hotels, resorts, rest camps, tourist facilities, or even new roads in the park, to the best knowledge of Peter Katjavivi, Speaker of the House of Parliament of Namibia.²⁹ The western, restricted part of the park has not been opened to visitors and is a testament to the preservation of wildlife with little to no human management. All of this, when taken together leads to a gradual equality between conservation and tourism that may just now finally be being met. Without a constant investment in new facilities and roads, nature will be able to reclaim parts of the park that has been managed and altered by humans for over sixty years.

Although it is difficult to speak of the present, tourism will not continue to grow as it has done historically without the construction of new facilities to accommodate more people with better roads. For the time being, the limit in the park seems to have been reached, and it is for future generations of leaders to decide if that limit is sufficient, or if tourism and conservation investments must once more be made in Etosha on a large scale.

Excellent research and the archival documents you found are very well used to create a clear argument. Paper: A. You were also an active and strong contributor to the course as a whole (and an excellent map reader to boot!). Overall grade course: A

²⁸ Trip to Namutoni by author, July 6th 2015.

²⁹ Informal conversation between author and Peter H. Katjavivi, June 26th 2015.