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BACK TO THE BUSH: RELAUNCHING WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

Major General Philip Chol Majak badly wants more guns, radios and hardy Toyotas that can make their way on the few terrible roads that cross South Sudan's intractable wildernesses. As a rebel bush commander in the South's 22-year-long bloody insurgency against Khartoum, he likely had a similar wish list. But this is not for a war; this is for a different kind of struggle.

Above: Giraffes in Boma National Park.

Below: Elephants in Zeraf Reserve of the Sudd wetlands.

"We don't have enough equipment at all and because of this our forces are not effective against poachers," Majak, Director for Training and Research in the semi-autonomous South's Ministry of Wildlife Conservation and Tourism, said. The disheveled ministry building is being partly renovated and cobwebby skulls and bones of various large mammals and a crocodile have been stacked up outside his office. Rebel

soldiers-turned-rangers stand nearby in the shade in new peacetime uniforms.

Sudan's north-south war, which ended in 2005, has left the region severely underdeveloped and its extremely varied 13 reserves and six parks in un-administered ruin and poacher-porous. Many communities are heavily armed and, although illegal, hunting for bush meat has been common practice for decades,



leaving mammal populations devastated. Getting protected areas back under control is an uphill battle for the South's 14,000 rangers but an important one: many see tourism and agriculture as key ways out of dependence on northern-controlled crude oil cash and towards a brighter future of relative normalcy.

When there are no vehicles, almost always the case, the rangers walk on foot, Majak said.

This is a crucial moment for the South as it struggles through the last stages of the fragile north-south peace deal ahead of a January 2011 referendum on independence. Many worry this may turn violent. Most Southerners say they want to secede but also believe Khartoum will fight to retain the South, especially its oil reserves that inflamed the civil war fought over ideological, racial and religious differences between the Islamist and Arab-world orientated north and the blacker, Christian south.

Much depleted by the wartime hunting of hungry soldiers and others, this is also a tenuous moment for South Sudan's animal populations. Peacetime has opened up administrative opportunities but also wilderness refuges for animals to an increasingly mobile population and to natural resource extraction companies looking to set up in the oil and mineral rich region, especially if peace holds. Some experts think this may be the most dangerous time for the South's wildlife yet.

But there is much to fight for.

In 2007 Southern officials nervously awaited the results of the U.S.-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) dry season aerial surveys, the first for 25 years.

The long war ruined the South's little infrastructure, fractured relations between the South's numerous

tribes, killed some 2 million people and displaced another 4 million. But before these WCS surveys the conflict's impact on animal populations was little understood. People spoke of ghostly emptiness in areas once full of game, but no one knew how bad the damage had been.

"We felt during the war that we had lost a very big number," Majak said. "But then we found we still have some. They can now recover. That is our hope."

In fact, in some cases, the situation was wildly better than expected. Aerial surveys from the windows of WCS' little Cessna 182 four-seater "Annie" over a 150,000 km² area in January and February 2007 showed that the South still has one of the world's largest animal migrations of an estimated 1.2 million animals: 155,460 endangered Tiang gazelle, 753,372 White Eared kob and 278,633 Mongalla gazelle.

"Given the length of the conflict, any good news was great news," Dr. Paul Elkan, the head of the WCS programme in the South, said. Further aerial surveys have been conducted since and he believes that the 2007 estimates – which in sheer numbers already put the South's migrations up with the Serengeti migration – may even be too small.

The discovery of the healthy South Sudan migrations caused a flurry of initial excitement and lasting renewed interest in putting back together Africa's ninth biggest park: the 20,000 km² Boma National Park planned in the 1980s mostly for the otherwise un-protected White-eared kob.

The park, which contains open grassland, swampy areas rich in birdlife that have made it a designated Important Bird Area (IBA) and woody vegetation cover, is now a top priority area for the WCS and

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the Ministry. The U.S. government aid agency has recently awarded \$12 million over the next three years, along with funds from WCS, to pay for boundary demarcation, infrastructure, community partnerships for conservation, anti-poaching efforts and other activities to help bring protected area management and sustainable land-use strategies to the Park and vast Boma-Jonglei landscape.

The mass – and by all reports extremely beautiful – antelope migrations will be central to transforming how the South is seen by outsiders, ministry tourism officer Laura Tete Lino told SWARA. The Southern government is struggling to pass tourism and wildlife protection bills to regulate the sector while also pushing ahead with the tiny Nimule National Park, a hoped-for small flagship of the South's potential. Despite funding problems, a small hotel in the park that borders Uganda and contains a handsome stretch of White Nile River has almost been completed. (WCS 2008 surveys of Nimule Park counted 69 elephants and 12 hippos. Numbers of animals had decreased since 2000 surveys, indicating extensive hunting that has probably made waterbuck locally extinct.)

A changed perception of South Sudan from war-torn danger spot to

Facing page: Savanna of Boma-Jonglei Landscape.



a place of natural beauty will take more than one hotel, but Lino and her colleagues already know what kind of tourism they want to attract when they begin envisaged advertising campaigns.

"We want to see eco-tourism run by the communities themselves. We plan to provide support and guidance," Lino said, adding that the same rural communities with their colourful cultures may also be an extra draw to international guests.

Internally, elephants have already begun to play a symbolic role in this change. Like thousands of former human refugees, some have returned to Nimule and other parts since the peace accord, generating hope for wider recovery. Others have been discovered hiding from harm on islands in remote parts of one of Africa's biggest wetlands.

This is the beautiful Sudd, created as the White Nile enters land so incredibly flat it breaks up into a vast – in the wet season as much as 130,000km² - inland delta. The area is extremely important for birds, including migrating species headed to Europe. WCS surveying suggests as many as 3,830 of the heavy-beaked and rare Shoebill stork may live there. The Sudd also hosts the world's most important population of Black-crowned crane, WCS reports say. Hoteliers in Juba have suggested with some little development the area could become a gem for bird lovers. WCS surveys in 2007 estimated the Sudd area to contain some 4,000 very rare Nile lechwe, 11,000 Bohor reedbuck and 10,000 buffalo, otherwise extensively hunted in the South.

"It's an area very few people have seen close up," Elkan said of the South's potential for tourism. "You can see lots of elephants in Kenya but in the south you can see them living in the Sudd, Africa's largest freshwater swamp."

Despite heavy poaching the elephant population is believed to be significant, one area alone east of the Nile River has an estimated 5,400 of the beasts (WCS survey). "We estimate from our surveys, that in eastern Africa, Southern Sudan is only behind Kenya and Tanzania in terms of number of elephants," Dr. Elkan said, "people don't realise that".

There was growing interest in South Sudan as a destination before the war and the proximity of



Above: Giant eland in Southern National Park.

tourism experts in Kenya and Uganda next door could hasten renewed curiosity. But pre-war South was a hunting destination and although there is much political support for a current shooting ban – at least, officials say, until animal numbers recover - some worry the South's rawness may attract back the big safari guns long before other tourists.

Ideally, agriculture officials want co-operative farming to become the norm in the South, with land firmly in the control of the community (and not sold off to big agri-business) in a way that echoes the community-emphasis in the draft tourism policy.

But it's not yet clear how well weak governance systems, perceived to be increasingly corrupt by Southerners, will manage these grassroots-orientated policies and conservationists want policies in place to protect as many animals and wildernesses as possible first.

"There's great potential for tourism here," Dr. Elkan said, "but the proper regulatory systems need to be put in place to ensure that its developed appropriately, without harm to the environment and contributing benefits to local communities."

DEVASTATION

The wildlife ministry's Acting Director General Fraser Tong becomes animated as he describes the marsh-dwelling Sitatunga (marsh buck),

perfectly adapted to its Sudd environment. "When in danger it dives into the water. The hooves are large to allow it to swim, as much as 10 – 20 metres at a time, under water."

Tong's enthusiasm is especially strong but animals are important to all of the South's tribes and cultures. The Southern rebels were literally but also figuratively "in the bush"; where guerillas were protected by their wilderness giving a contemporary twist to the Southern close association to it.

And importantly, conservation efforts by the former rebels that now lead the Southern government began long ago, as part of a wider 'struggle' than armed resistance can do alone; a struggle to be economically viable that has only intensified in peacetime.

Seeing the future value of tourism, the rebel movement's much-revered leader John Garang put a hunting ban in place to try and curb game shot by hungry soldiers. He also pulled commanders like Majak with some background in conservation from the army into a rebel wildlife force to guard parks and reserves.

"We started with 100 rangers and 20 of us officers," Majak said. "(We) had a very strong feeling for wildlife, for the benefits sustainable wildlife could bring to our people."

These efforts, and the resonance of those wartime decisions today,

Skye Wheeler is the Reuters correspondent in Juba, Southern Sudan. She comes from an east African family background and has always had an interest in wildlife.

are seen as important. But they were not enough, or were too late to stop much destruction.

Waterbuck, ostrich, warthog, Lelwel hartebeest, Grants gazelle and Beisa Oryx were just some of the other species seen during WCS assessments (in addition to the 2007 surveys, some 29,000 km² were also surveyed in dry season, 2008). South Sudan is the only country where both Derby's Eland and common eland can be seen, Elkan said. But numbers of many of these heavily hunted species are desperately low and some run an immediate risk of local extinction unless effective protection is developed.

The White-eared kob, Tiang, Reedbuck, and other migratory species may have fared better, Dr Elkan said, because of their seasonal movements into hard-to-reach areas and lower dependence on water holes.

Tong remembers the days when the huge Southern National Park, first gazetted in 1939 by British colonial powers, was seen as a treasure trove of large mammals, perhaps especially for its estimated 168 white rhino.

"There still may be a few or they may have all been killed by poachers," Tong said. Not only did WCS 2007 aerial surveys over the area not report any rhino sightings but numbers of other species were also drastically low.

"Surveys in 1981 estimated some 15,000 elephant in the park and surrounding area. We estimate there are now less than 1,000," Dr Elkan said. Earlier surveys of the park, which lies in the important Sudano-Guinean eco-zone and supports extensive woodlands, put the buffalo population at some 75,000. "But we didn't see one," Elkan said.

Officials believe during the chaos of the war, large numbers of armed northern nomads came on horseback and ravaged the park for bush meat, ivory and skins. Rough age estimates of skeletons in the park suggest that the large-scale slaughter of animals is probably not recent although poachers are known to be still active in the area. Recently rangers in the park confiscated ten poacher guns, a good result for the still emergent wildlife force, although the scarcity of animals in the park is probably now a greater deterrent to organised hunters than the rangers themselves.

Southern National Park, about the same size as Rwanda, is on the western side of the White Nile, a different environment from the swamps and open savannas of Boma Park area on the border with Ethiopia. Despite the low numbers conservationists still believe the park could be a venue for recovery, especially as it is infested with tsetse fly and so has very few human settlements.

Human settlement is extensive in the Boma National Park (WCS surveys also estimated some 200,000 cattle). The communities in the park are heavily armed. Vicious inter-tribal fighting between competitive pastoralist tribes near the western boundary of the park killed over 650 people earlier this year. Allegiance and ethnicity in the South were complex issues during the war and more than one of tribes in the area have a distrustful relationship with the Southern government.

While top government like the idea of conservation and the park, persuading leaders and communities, fiercely protective over their land, to give up extremely valuable grazing and watering resources will be an enormous challenge and politically tricky, officials said.

"The residents are very adamant that there must be benefit of the park for them," Tong said in an interview with SWARA. WCS has

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already begun conducting trainings with local chiefs and administrators on protected area management with a view to their participation. Tong said a management plan, currently being written, will include zoning.

"There are areas they will bring livestock in for part of the year. They will also be able to utilise the park for certain resources like fish and wild fruits," Tong explained. "The first priority has to be giving people jobs."

But even as they struggle with putting Boma Park back on the map, wildlife officials have turned their eye to a huge area to the west of the park of about 17,000km² that currently acts as wet season refuge for large numbers of game and is much less populated.

This is the proposed Bandingalo National Park, conveniently close to capital Juba for tourists. If the conservationists are successful in this endeavour, South Sudan could have Africa's largest stretch of protected unbroken savannah.

"It's absolutely spectacular," Dr. Elkan said, "in addition to supporting the White-eared kob, Tiang, and Reedbuck migrations during a large part of the year, there are lion, giraffe and probably the South's last remaining zebra there. It is one of the most intact areas left in the world." ●

— Skye Wheeler

Protected Areas of Southern Sudan

