

Destruction and Protection of Wild Life in French Equatorial and French West Africa

By LUCIEN BLANCOU

(Photographs by Marcel Bonnotte)

IN this short article I shall talk more about French Equatorial Africa, where I worked for thirty years, than about French West Africa, with which I am not well acquainted. French Togoland is included in French West Africa, and the French Cameroons are not being discussed at all.

To understand the present position of the fauna in these territories, from the Atlantic and the Sahara to the Belgian Congo, a brief review of past events is necessary.

As in all African regions the arrival of colonists, without exception unfortunately, has witnessed the beginnings of a general massacre of wild game, the phases of the slaughter, in general, being the same throughout.

The first explorers, whether civil or military, hunted only for the pot, which is necessary and normal; they were in no way excessive even though there were no restrictive laws. The first occupiers, usually military, continued likewise to hunt for the pot, but were often somewhat wasteful, partly because of the increased needs, but mainly because of the abundance of free arms and of war munitions—arms but little suited for hunting, except in the hands of good marksmen. Meanwhile matters continued to be moderately insecure on account of the existence of domestic cattle in the North, and of vast areas of no-man's-land, etc.

A second wave of destruction, very much worse than the first, followed upon the return of peaceful conditions. This second wave can be set roughly from 1900-1910 for French West Africa and from 1910-1920 for French Equatorial Africa. From these dates large game was hunted both by the purveyors of meat for the posts in the Guinean and forest zones as heretofore, as also by the professional hunters shooting for the world markets. These latter, though mainly interested in ivory, nevertheless killed off large numbers of game. They were mainly Europeans with many excellent African hunters in their pay.

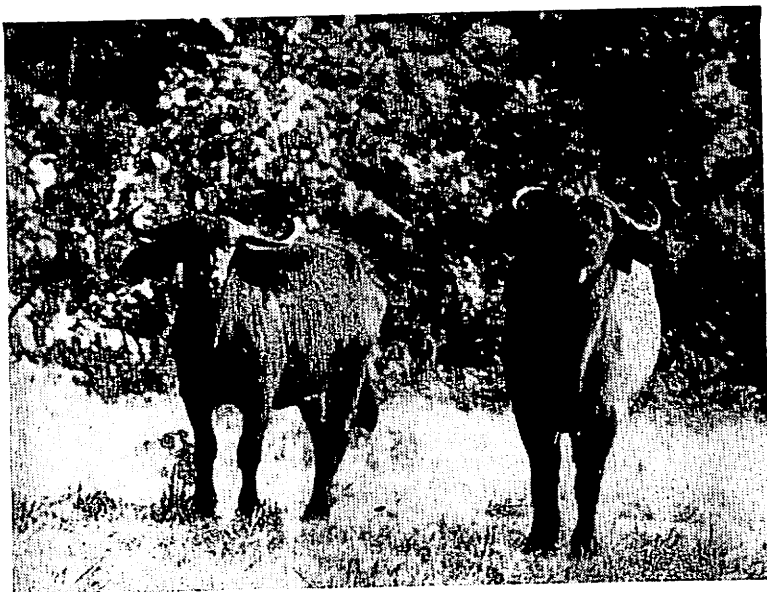
During the years 1920-30, in French Equatorial Africa, and well before this in French West Africa, there was added the systematic killing "for meat" by the professional hunters. It was not only a question of providing meat for the military posts with large and small game, but also the provisioning of the working parties, both public and private, notably the railways and in particular the Congo-Ocean stretch from Brazzaville to Pointe Noire, with fresh and smoked meat, especially smoked. Thus the elephants,

Facing: A pride of lions on the prowl in the Kruger National Park.

(Photo: Dick Wolff)

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13(u) Dec 1959



Buffalo in French Equatorial Africa.

the giraffes and particularly the rhinos and the hippos of Tchad Territory were killed off mercilessly, and were sent by the ton to feed the labourers (themselves also mostly from the Tchad region) in the equatorial forest of the Mayombe. At the same time the good prices obtained for their horn added further enemies, both black and white, for the rhino. So that by 1933 this animal was practically wiped out in French Equatorial Africa. (In French West Africa it would seem that it disappeared from the scene shortly before the arrival of the European).

The protective measures, put into operation after 1931, which I am about to discuss, were set up to put a stop to most of these fatal abuses of commercial hunting in French Equatorial Africa. In French West Africa there was hardly any progress in this respect until 1951. But then conditions in this territory were somewhat different, in that since 1900 its human population was denser and its animal population on the other hand sparser, mainly due to natural causes.

The third wave of destruction was let loose after the Second World War. Its origin was clearly political and may be attributed to the increased number of improved fire-arms in the hands of the Africans. This wave likewise spared no animal since it aimed at obtaining and selling the largest amount of meat at a maximum price throughout the territory. This was made possible, thanks to the continually improving network of roads.

Attention must be drawn to the fact that the most important factors which had allowed the unleashing of the second wave had

been:— the abolition at the end of the war of all dangerous or unsafe zones for man, allowing free circulation once again, the improvements in hygiene and in medicine, with the resultant enlarged population (especially in French West Africa) and hence the increase in commerce and in the demand for food.

The most surprising *a priori* result and the most lamentable in these new conditions, due to the *pax europaea*, despite the prohibitions (purely theoretical), was an intensification of hunting "by fire", i.e., by means of encircling given areas with a ring of fire, especially between 1920 and 1931.

In view of all these destructive forces, protective measures were taken, especially administrative ones. Forewarned well before the 1914-1918 war by scientific organisations, foremost among them the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle de Paris, as well as by independent individuals, the responsible officials of the two Federations instigated or prepared the enforcement of various hunting laws (1916 for French Equatorial Africa; 1925 for French West Africa). These aimed at almost totally restricting the liberty of hunting at that time (apart from various purely fiscal taxes), and established lists of protected game. In addition, reserves of differing status were created at long intervals but these were badly patrolled in F.E.A. and not patrolled at all in F.W.A.

In F.E.A. a complete revision of the 1916 decree was undertaken, based on the reports and on the investigations of the late Bruneau de Laborie, Chief Inspector of Hunting in the French Colonies. His premature death (as a result of an attack by a lion in the Tchad



Three kob ewes photographed near Lake Tchad.

region in 1930) did not allow him to supervise the application of the 1929-1930 decree, but twenty years after his death certain European professional hunters still bore him a lively grudge. In 1931 the late Saint-Floris, the new Inspector in F.E.A., investigated sites for National Parks and for hunting reserves. These functioned as from 1934, though somewhat irregularly—due to the ridiculously poor supervision. As to the hunting laws, these were altered and amended several times with a view to being more practical. They were finally revised in 1944. They served as a basis for the general 1947 decree for all the French territories in Africa.

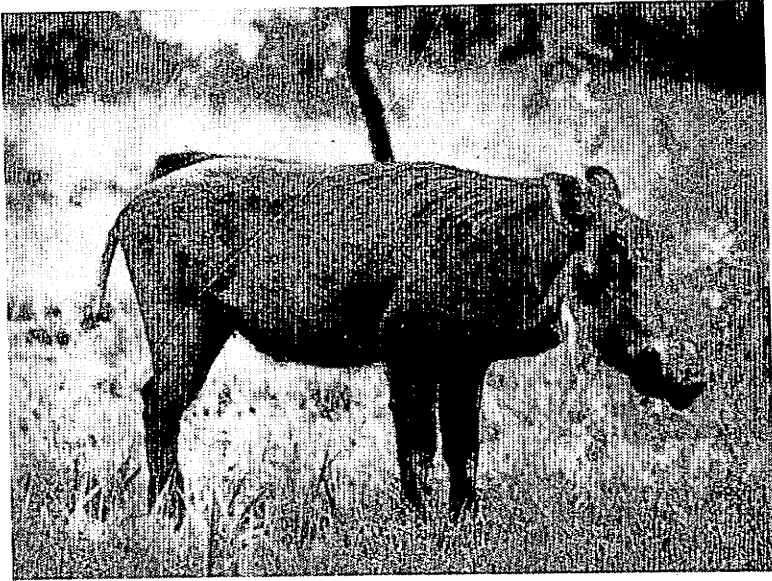
This decree, though with many alterations, is still in existence, for in enlarging upon the 1944 decree, it was often modified, undoubtedly in the desired direction, but not always very realistically, and it was necessary at times to revert to previous dispositions. Also, since 1954, other amendments altered it considerably, often in a contradictory manner. As to the Reserves, these have been added to since 1934, at times by a modification of status. Very few have been abolished, and many exist only on paper.

Furthermore, of great importance is the creation in 1945 of a Hunting Service, a Service for the Protection of the Fauna in the Ministry for Overseas Affairs, with local inspectorates in Africa. This Service was autonomous and it would have obtained interesting results had the necessary personnel been obtainable. This was not the case: Five European Inspectors and forty African rangers in F.E.A. (for 100,000 square kilometers of reserves); and but two European Inspectors in F.W.A. Further, in 1954, this service was attached to, even integrated with, that of Forests and Water Affairs on the pretext of even greater efficiency. This proved correct for F.W.A. but not for F.E.A.; despite the additional assistance of the three to four forestry inspectors, the rest remained indifferent, at times even hostile, and their African personnel incompetent.

Summing up at the end of 1953 the position was roughly:—

In F.W.A., after 1948, the conservation of nature made great progress under the good care of the Department of Forestry, the laws were well studied and often well applied; a small number of Reserves for Fauna (only 6) but under much better surveillance, supplemented by a large number of "classified forests," in principle out of bounds for hunting.

Unfortunately the damage already done, and especially the previous general attitude of both the whites and the blacks, was such that one could put this effort down as being at least twenty to thirty years too late, for too many sites had been occupied, too many bad habits were too deeply rooted, too many regions suitable for conservation had been despoiled. In F.E.A., thanks to de Laborie and his successors, professional hunting by whites was practically stopped by 1933 and that of the Africans was greatly diminished, despite numerous abuses. There were a number of Reserves (2 Total Reserves, 4 National Parks, 11 Faunal Reserves and 1 Hunting Reserve), some well patrolled, especially so in Oubangui-Chari.



A warthog in French Equatorial Africa.

The Service however continued to lack means, personnel and material. To make them appear "payable" in the eyes of the local assemblies—dispensers of funds—two zoological gardens were developed with considerable publicity to attract as large a number of tourist hunters as possible.

The political reforms introduced after the end of the war now began to dominate the scene; reforms leading from a limited suffrage to universal suffrage, from territorial councillors to federal, to deputies, senators and finally Ministers. Local Governments became more and more autonomous, then republics; completely independent of the French community in Guinea. Nature and Fauna and the Conservation Services had to face up to this third wave of destruction. The African electorate, now masters, demanded modern arms and the right to sell meat and to hunt game to their hearts' content. On the other hand in the reserves, mostly situated in non-inhabited regions, but little poaching took place (especially in F.E.A.) and but little objection was levelled at the principle of their existence.

Also, as from 1951, the number of sportsmen in F.E.A. from Europe and America, with their base in Fort Archambault in the Tchad district, gradually increased (as did Nairobi in Kenya). In F.W.A. the numbers of big game were too small to attract many hunters. Unfortunately the guides, an ever increasing body, soon cleared out the more accessible areas, often under the most unsporting conditions, breaking the laws despite, or because of, their severity. Control remained ineffective. This tourism of "killers"

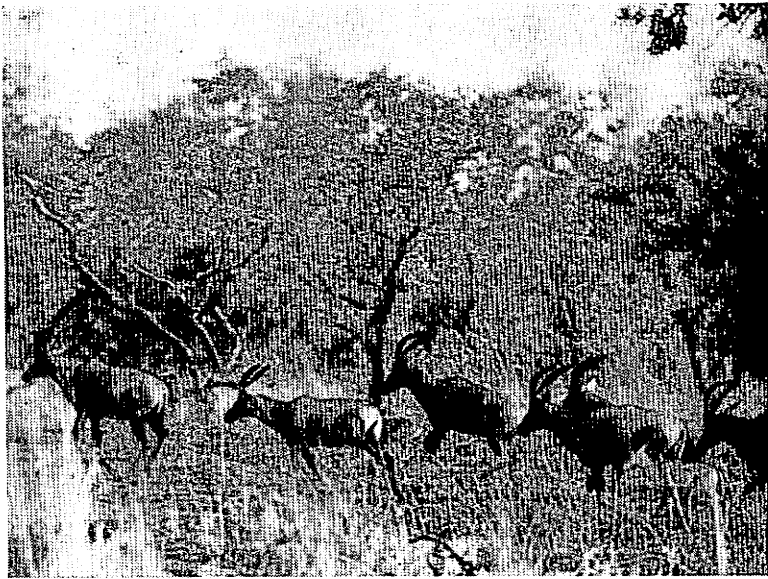
—photographers only came in small numbers—thus became a new destructive force, added to all the others.

And now, what of the future? It depends greatly on the political developments and thus on the new administration in French Africa.

The two Federations, F.W.A. and F.E.A., have "broken apart." There are no ties between Mauritania, Senegal, Sudan, Upper Volta, the Ivory Coast and Dahomey on the one hand and the Gaboon, French Congo, Oubangui-Chari on the other, except local customs and economic agreements.

The fauna and the flora will be, or will not be, studied, protected, on paper or in actuality, and set aside in Reserves, as each Republic decides for itself. One can thus envisage two hypotheses as to the probable line of action of these Governments now entirely in the hands of Africans. All will be well if their leaders are "strong men," such as Mr. Sekou Touré in French Guinea and Mr. Houphouët Boigny in the Ivory Coast. If the wild life protectionists can convince these leaders of the necessity of the conservation of the fauna, in the interests of the citizens of each Republic, much hope could be entertained. For the manner of governing of these new leaders more closely approaches that of the ancient chiefs of the West, of Samory, Rabah or of Krutchev in U.S.S.R. rather than our so-called democratic western methods. If by some means or other they obtain the necessary monies, they will be obeyed. It may happen that they may follow the lead given by the ex-English and ex-Netherlands Indies, and engage white Europeans or Americans, experts in these matters, experts who will be supported by the Government in the application of their recommendations. One could then hope that the results will be better than those obtained heretofore by the French administration, whose competent services were continually being handicapped by political, administrative and pecuniary considerations, all hostile to (full) protection. These results might thus approach those obtained, since 1917 in Russia, in Europe, in Asia, all worthy of high praise. And this all the more easily, in that for political motives the new leaders are obliged to limit and to control the traffic in arms closely.

But the opposite may take place. This is to be feared in view of racial, or rather tribal hates, which existed during French sovereignty but could not then manifest themselves. The new freedoms soon showed that these rivalries, camouflaged under the most fantastic political designations, soon appeared on the surface and expressed themselves merely as slogans at first, then as insults, to be followed by blows and finally as disturbances or riots, with wounded and dead. If this movement continues, and it is to be feared that it will do so in several of the new Republics for want of strong and energetic leaders, as also for want of a large enough and competent African staff, each Republic in its turn runs the risk of being broken up into smaller territories, or of living in a primitive anarchy. In this case, arms and munitions will often be kept and used for local fights rather than for hunting, as was the case before the years 1900-1920. But also for want of a strong authority it will be



A herd of korrigum in the Lake Tchad region.

impossible to enforce the regulations and to make the people respect the Reserves. This will be to the great advantage of those trafficking without scruples, i.e., of the total destructors. In fact, I believe that such conditions already exist elsewhere, for example in some South American Republics since the end of Spanish colonialism. Moreover, the two states, i.e., of dictatorship and of anarchy, may alternate, which would be the worst possible eventuality at least for wild life.

With these prospects which I wish could be more rosy, but thirty years of administering humans and in defence of African wild life prevents my doing so, I can but end by expressing serious concern. It would have been desirable that nature conservation in all its aspects, from the ground and subsoil right up to wild life, should have remained under the direction and the control of the French African "Communaute" instead of having been handed over to the whims of the local republics.

Better still, and this applies for the whole of Africa, I wish with all my heart, and I am not the only one to do so in France or elsewhere, that this immense problem could be treated at an international level for the whole world, and that as soon as possible. And this the more so that, for all, it is a matter of life or death, whatever be their colour, their religious beliefs, their political ideals, whether occidental or oriental, "capitalist" or "socialist", civilized or not. If all do not tackle the problem together by combining all their efforts, it will certainly be too late, even before the year 2000.



A typical Msasa tree with its bent trunk and forked branches.



Flowers of the Msasa showing the white filaments.