



Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin take a look at conservation and tourism in Tanzania's giant Selous Game Reserve.

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IN THE HEART OF SOUTHERN Tanzania lies one of the largest areas of protected wilderness in the world. Created by the German government between 1905 and 1912 and known today as the Selous Game Reserve, it is named after the famous adventurer and hunter who died and was buried there in 1917. In the 1980s the vast Selous, an area of 43,626 square kilometres, witnessed possibly the worst slaughter of wildlife, particularly of elephants and rhinos, in Africa. Two events halted this massacre: a fall in the price of ivory and a huge and successful crackdown on poaching. Now, elephant numbers are rising and tourism is on the increase—and with it, a greater public interest in conservation.

Rhinos, however, remain on the brink of extinction. The directors of a new lodge named Sand Rivers have initiated, along with the government, a rhino project to protect the black rhinos in their area, and a World Wide Fund for Nature technical adviser is currently surveying the whole of the Selous for rhinos. Hopefully, with this kind of support, the Selous rhinos, once one of the biggest populations in the world, will yet survive.

The Selous, which covers about 5 percent of Tanzania's land surface, has some of the largest populations in Africa of buffaloes, hippos, crocodiles, large cats and wild dogs—of which there are at least nine hundred—and it

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is the most important single area in eastern Africa for elephants. With its wide range of habitats—wetlands, riverine forests, acacia and miombo woodlands and open grasslands—this unique ecosystem has been recognised by the United Nations as a World Heritage Site.

In 1981 there were about eighty-five thousand elephants and two thou-

sand black rhinos in the Selous Game Reserve, the largest populations of both species of any place in Africa. By the late 1980s, these figures dropped to about twenty-five thousand and less than five hundred respectively.

From the middle of 1989 some of the major ivory-importing countries established laws prohibiting such trade, and in early 1990 the CITES ivory ban was implemented. With such huge pressure on consumers not to buy ivory, the demand for ivory fell and poaching declined significantly. (Figures supplied by Tanzania's Department of Wildlife show that the wholesale price for raw ivory in Dar es Salaam dropped from well over US \$100 a kilo in the late 1980s to about US \$8 a kilo by early 1997.)

Also in 1989, Tanzania launched Operation Uhai—an anti-poaching campaign involving, for the first time ever, huge government resources to overcome the massive illegal hunting of elephants and rhinos. It was also the first time that Tanzania's armed forces were deployed in any part of the country to solve this immense problem. One thousand soldiers surrounded the Selous, an area well known for decades for ivory and rhino horn smuggling,

while a thousand police and two hundred personnel from the Department of Wildlife and from Tanzania's National Parks swept the rest of the country. Between June 1989 and February 1991, 2,607 poachers and traders were arrested and prosecuted, 3,044 elephant tusks were recovered and 3,386 rounds of ammunition and 11,411 firearms seized.

Operation Uhai was like a light switch; it stopped elephant poaching in Tanzania virtually overnight, and provided invaluable intelligence on the poachers and dealers. "Poaching of elephants is now significantly reduced in the Selous," stated Musa Lyimo, the Department of Wildlife's chief of law enforcement in July 1997. Even though the department pays a reward of 10 percent of the value of ivory intercepted if an arrest is made, there have been no recent ivory confiscations in or around the Selous. Today, elephant numbers in the Selous Game Reserve have built up, with the return of thousands of stragglers, to around thirty-five thousand, although large tuskers are still conspicuously lacking. The herd structures are rebuilding and the elephants are less timid.

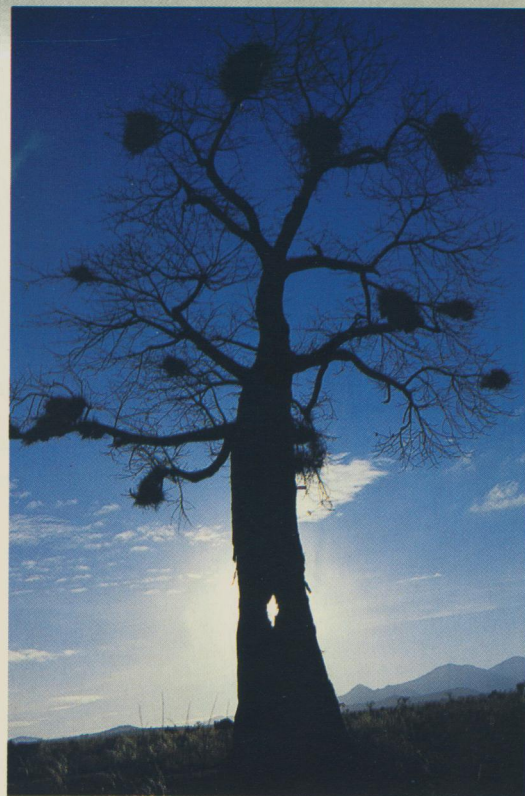
Recently, however, elephant poaching for ivory appears to be increasing again. According to Richard Bonham, who leads walking safaris in the area, a professional hunter found seven recently-poached elephants with their tusks removed on the south bank of the Rufiji River in September 1997, and Bonham himself recently saw a fresh elephant carcass which had been burnt to try to hide it. On the other hand, since 1990, very few rhino carcasses have been found in the Selous. Although this appears encouraging, it may partly be because the carcass dismembers quickly and, unlike elephant bones which are white in colour, rhino bones are grey and not easily spotted from an aeroplane.

Musa Lyimo also warned that poaching of elephant meat has started to become more significant since 1993, especially around the southwest part of the Selous. Considered a delicacy in the districts of Songea and Iringa, elephant meat is dried and bartered in the villages for maize and rice. However, one must not overstate the importance of this elephant meat consumption as many people around the Selous, especially in the east, do not eat it. Trade in other bush meat is a more serious problem on some of the Selous' boundaries, where wire snares kilometres long can be found. Logging for hardwoods near the boundary is a further problem.

Benson Kibonde, project manager of the Selous Game Reserve, has 120 game scouts. He is now rehabilitating vehicles and graders and has increased the number of casual labourers. He wishes to map the Selous to decide where to concentrate his forces and wants to increase mobility on the ground, on the rivers and lakes and in the air as well as improve overall communications. Kibonde says that the Selous' rhinos are so few and so scattered that unless he protects the whole of the reserve, they will not survive. His long-term plan is to improve anti-poaching on the Selous boundary and hope rhino numbers will then rise.

With massive illegal hunting in the Selous now a thing of the past, tourism based on game viewing has increased substantially, from an average of under 2,000 bed nights a year between 1985 and 1990 to 8,700 in 1995—earning US \$150,000 for Tanzania's government in 1995. The Selous consists of forty-seven blocks of which forty-five are currently used for sport hunting by seventeen companies; hunting generates over US \$1.5 million annually for the government—24 percent of the total revenue from tourist hunting in Tanzania. Part of the northern sector, only 3 percent of the Reserve, is set aside for photographic safaris. Unlike northern Tanzania, the Selous aims at high-income visitors and low-volume tourism, attracting the upper end of the market. Tourism has become one of Tanzania's major foreign exchange earners, and the southern circuit, incorporating Zanzibar, the Tanzanian coast, Selous Game Reserve and Ruaha National Park, is only now becoming known internationally by tour operators.

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The Selous Game Reserve is named after Frederick Courtenay Selous (1851-1917). Hunter, explorer, naturalist and conservationist, Selous spent most of his life roaming southern Africa. He is buried in the game reserve named in his honour where he died fighting Germans during World War I. The Selous is now one of Africa's largest protected areas. Only a small area in the north is open for tourism; the bulk of the reserve is divided into hunting areas. A fuller story of the Selous can be found in Peter Matthiessen's *Sand Rivers*, a detailed account of a trek he made near the confluence of the Luwegu and Mbarangano rivers in the south of the reserve.



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Sand Rivers Lodge, completed in June 1995, is the newest of the handful of lodges and camps dotting the northern Selous. Small and exclusive, it offers a diverse taste of African wilderness tourism. Staying in luxury cottages you can experience game drives in open vehicles or be taken walking by knowledgeable guides into the open grassland savanna and along the dry river beds of the Rufiji's many tributaries. Alternatively, you can take a multi-day bush walking safari, sleeping each night under the stars as Selous himself did. Then there is the Rufiji River itself. Deep and wide enough for boating, it offers a perfect way of watching elephants and smaller animals come down to the river to drink.

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin are internationally known experts on rhinoceros conservation. They are regular contributors to Swara.

What makes the Selous unique is that it is the largest game reserve in Africa but it has very little accommodation—only 148 beds in 6 private camps or lodges with an average occupancy rate of only 22 percent for a ten-month year (in 1995). Until the mid-1990s, clients had to hire their own aeroplane to visit the Selous, but there is now a scheduled daily flight, making transport much more convenient and less expensive. Further construction of camps or lodges is not allowed in the northern Selous, a government agreement to prevent mass tourism and overdevelopment.

According to a 1997 Price Waterhouse report, the reserve generates significant revenue for the country—US \$1,850,000 in 1995—yet it is under-funded by the government, receiving back less than half of what it earns. This is undermining its long-term economic and conservation value. The sport hunting and tourist season, the source of the Selous' income, runs from June, after the long rains, to the end of March. The prime time to visit is between June and October in the dry, cooler season. This is followed by the hot season and then the rains, when some tourists still visit as it is aesthetically the more beautiful time and the vegetation is at its best.

The most recently built lodge in the Selous, standing geographically apart from the rest is Sand Rivers, which opened in June 1995. It is not only the most isolated but also the most exclusive. Its uniqueness is that you see no other tourists and it is small with only sixteen beds. With six vehicles and four boats at the disposal of visitors you have total freedom to do what you want and to choose when to do it—and there are plenty of choices. The Rufiji River is deep and wide enough for boating, a perfect way of game viewing. Apart from the joy of spotting elephants and smaller animals coming down to the river to drink, and the plentiful water birds—there are about four hundred bird species in the Selous from both the southern and eastern African regions—it is exciting to be on the water among the hippos which lie partially submerged and then suddenly rise with great jaws apart. And if you enjoy fishing, there is a seemingly endless supply of tiger fish, tilapia, and catfish.

As well as game drives in open vehicles, visitors can be taken walking by knowledgeable guides into the open

grassland savanna, or along the dry river beds of the Rufiji's many tributaries. This is an experience of true wilderness which one can have virtually nowhere else in the world. With its large quantities of big game the Selous offers a glimpse of life in Africa a hundred years ago—walking in silence, with every sense alert, and just a rifle for protection. It is a humbling experience and a huge privilege to be able to follow on foot the fresh tracks of hippos along a sand river, surprise a dozing buffalo in a pool, then hear the rumblings of an elephant, momentarily hidden by a tree on the bank, only several steps away. In our overcrowded world, few people will ever have such a chance to feel the power and exhilaration of Africa's largest wilderness.

If more could know the experience, more would value it. Many visitors to the Selous do choose at least one night of fly camping—a night under the stars with only a simple mosquito net for protection. And a few choose to walk with only porters and a guide for two or three weeks through the bush, an opportunity only Sand Rivers offers, surely one of the greatest experiences of wilderness in the world.

Sand Rivers is unique in one more way, and perhaps the most important of all. It is the only lodge or permanent tented camp in the Selous putting significant amounts of money directly into rhino conservation. In November 1995, the founders of Sand Rivers, Richard Bonham and Bimb and Lizzy Theobald, along with Tanzania's director of wildlife and the project manager of the Selous Game Reserve, set up the Sand Rivers Rhino Project.

This enterprise is the first of its kind aimed at protecting one specific rhino population. These rhinos—at least six in number and ranging over perhaps a hundred square kilometres—occur in the Kidai area which is west of Sand Rivers and just north of the Rufiji River. They have survived due to their remoteness and inaccessibility. However, when Richard Bonham found a poachers' camp in the area in 1994, he and the Department of Wildlife decided anti-poaching patrols were needed to save the rhinos. Sand Rivers raised funds for the Rhino Project and refurbished the abandoned rangers' post at Kidai. The Director of the Department of Wildlife, Bakari Mbano, allocated six game scouts in January 1996 and the Rhino Project doubled their salaries and paid

them night allowances as incentives, and this continues today. One client to Sand Rivers paid for a leader's salary for a year, and this scout joined the others in March 1996 at Kidai Camp. Good leadership gives motivation which is vital to the success of patrol work.

As of July 1997, Lizzy Theobald had raised nearly US \$50,000 for the protection of these rhinos, not only for augmenting salaries for anti-poaching staff, but also for uniforms and equipment, including VHF radios, GPS, rechargeable batteries, infra-red cameras and night-vision binoculars. Sand Rivers also helps Kidai Camp with transport and fuel. The scouts' presence is an essential deterrent, not only to would-be rhino poachers, but also to fish and meat poachers who come up the old river course from Mloka village on the eastern Selous boundary, a day's

walk away from this rich fishing area. They often fish at night in the lakes. This year several fishermen have been arrested and taken to Morogoro District court by the Kidai game scouts. (Unfortunately, each case is usually postponed until the game scout must return to the Selous. The case is then dropped.) More importantly, however, no rhino has been poached recently in the area, and in 1997 a new calf was born, a fine tribute to the success of the Rhino Project.

Sand Rivers is an excellent and rare example of how a private tourist lodge is working with the government to support conservation. For tourists staying there, it is good to know that the lodge is effectively putting money back into protecting the Selous' rhinos, rather than solely aiming to make a profit. We wish more lodges in Africa would do the same.

Elizabeth Theobald

On August 27, 1997, Elizabeth Theobald, co-director of Nomad Safaris and Sand Rivers Selous died suddenly and tragically of malaria just after visiting her rhino project. Lizzy, a Kenyan national who had lived in Dar es Salaam for ten years, was a co-founder and driving force behind the project, putting almost more energy into that than into running her lodge.

Through Save the Rhino International in the UK, she had recently auctioned at Bonham's in London a safari to Sand Rivers and Zanzibar, raising nearly £2,000 sterling for the project, and the British government had just donated, again through Lizzy's efforts, £19,000 sterling to be spent, amongst other things, on infra-red cameras for photographing rhinos automatically in the bush. Shortly before her death she had also appealed to local and international donors to donate US \$110,000 to the project to provide extra wages for the game scouts involved in essential anti-poaching work and to finance an experienced leader for the project.

Lizzy's wish was to scientifically verify, with WWF's input and guidance, rhino numbers and distribution in the northern area of the Selous in order to advise game scouts on the important locations. Currently Max Morgan-Davies, WWF's technical adviser and Tanzania rhino coordinator, is working with the rhino project to assess rhino numbers in the Selous. It is important that this co-operation with WWF continues in order to save the Kidai rhinos and that Lizzy's death does not stall the project.

Lizzy Theobald is buried in the Selous on a bluff overlooking the Rufiji River close to the rhinos and her lodge. Her grave is marked and mapped and she keeps good company with F.C. Selous himself.

