

Man-eaters of Tsavo

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This paper is likely to be the only work I produce on a project I conceived some years ago, which would have recounted the destruction of most large carnivore populations throughout the world during the last two hundred years. This project occurred to me as a result of my study of the British Empire and its voracious destruction of tigers, elephants and the like, and my time spent as a youth in Montana, where I once heard someone brag they had killed the last wolf in Montana. I noticed, with some exceptions like wolves in certain parts of Europe and lions in the Middle East, that until around 1850, large carnivores still retained close to their historic ranges. Unfortunately, with industrialization, from approximately 1850, there began a hundred year orgy of destruction of large carnivores, and other wildlife, that coincided with the high mark of Western imperialism and colonization. I wondered about the relationship between humans and large carnivores and the ideas that facilitated this slaughter, so that it seemed the natural thing to do, once humans developed tools that made it easy for them to kill wild animals.

This destruction only ended around 1950 when in many instances there was little wildlife left to destroy. There followed a brief period of self-congratulation with the thorough job of extermination we had done, followed closely thereafter with remorse by a few people who asked “what have we done?” Since the 1970s there has been increasing effort to undo what was done and salvage many large mammal species from extinction. I was reminded of this history just last summer on a trip to southern France where I saw on a set of nineteenth photographs for sale that tragically depicted captured wild bears for

circus show. I was informed they were Pyrenees bears, which had gone extinct only relatively recently and that an effort to re-establish bears in the Pyrenees with transplanted bears from Central Europe had turned into a debacle as the transplanted bears were inappropriate for the Pyrenees. For many of the large carnivores, bears and big cats, the outlook is bleak. In the case of most tiger groups, Siberian, South Asian, and Sumatran, the Florida cougar, snow leopards, and cheetahs, there may well be alive today a member of those groups who will see the birth of the last wild member of their type, which means more or less forty years before their extinction in the wild.

For myself this thought brings about a feeling of great sorrow and loss. Though in the case of the large carnivores, it is difficult to articulate how their extinction will be a loss to humankind in any practical sense. Though this tale has been told in fragments, when I first thought of the project I was unaware of any general history relating it and imagined I might supply it. As life happens, I never even got the chance to investigate the extent of scholarly work in the area. So this paper is a bit of the story, told through the fascinating tale of the man-eaters of Tsavo.

There are several themes I wish to explore. First is a discourse that describes carnivores as impediments to civilization and progress. This seems to go along with human civilizations which have the ability to destroy wildlife and nature on a large scale. Second is a discourse that described the relationship between humans and carnivores as a state of war. This seems to coincide with relationships where humans are not able to necessarily overcome nature. Third is a discourse that imparts magical powers to large carnivores, which is perhaps a reflection of human fear and awe of them. Each of these discourses impart to humans justification to conquer carnivores, pacify the land, and

eliminate carnivores as a threat to people and domestic animals. In this regard, we must keep in mind, that unlike other animals on earth, with the exception of certain shark species, only large carnivores have the capacity on an individual basis to easily kill unarmed human beings and potentially to do so for the purpose of eating them. The idea of being defenseless and eaten are issues humans as a whole will have to be reconciled with if any of the large carnivore species are to survive in the wild.

Who were the man-eaters of Tsavo? In short, they were two lions who in 1898 brought construction of the Mombasa to Lake Victoria railroad in British East Africa, modern Kenya and Uganda, to a brief halt by attacking and eating railroad workers. This event has become embedded in popular culture through Colonel J. H. Patterson's 1907 memoir the The Man-Eaters of Tsavo, a chapter Peter Beard's 1963 master work, The End of the Game, two movies 1952 *Bwana Devil* and 1996 *The Ghost and the Darkness* and two more recent books one by Bruce Patterson The Man-Eaters of Tsavo and Philip Caputo's 2002 Man-Eaters.

Britain formally annexed East Africa as a colony in the 1895. As a result of their experience of the industrial revolution, the British were great believers in the transforming power of railroads. So in 1895, soon after the initial pacification of the tribes of East Africa, they began planning a railroad from the coast to Lake Victoria, confident it would bring commerce, the engine of civilization, to East Africa. Construction began in the 1896 and the line as planned would run through the great plain of Kenya with its vast herds of wildlife and across the Tsavo River. Today, the lonely railroad lines of Africa often look quixotic so rapidly were they outdated by truck and air transportation. Back then they were the supposed great achievements of empire. At the

time, the native tribes of east Africa were not particularly interested in giving up their carefree lives as cattle raising warriors to engage in backbreaking work for a pittance as the destruction of their culture forcing them into manual labor was not yet complete. Consequently, the laborers for the railroad were imported from India. The managers and engineers were, of course, British.

J. H. Patterson was a railroad engineer employed to oversee the construction of a permanent bridge for the rail line over the Tsavo River. He arrived in Mombasa on March 1, 1898 and arrived at Tsavo a little more than one week later. Between two to three thousand Indian workers were already there working on the rail line. Patterson got an inkling that placing a couple thousand humans in the middle of the Kenyan plain, to sleep out in the open at night without protection, was perhaps not the brightest idea in the world when, within a few days of his arrival he heard that a few workers had disappeared, purportedly seized by lions at night and eaten.¹ He did not believe the stories until an Indian he knew disappeared, and he traced lion tracks to the poor man's half eaten remains. Patterson related that the Africans claimed the lions were the spirits of deceased African chiefs come back to stop the railroad.² Though Patterson is dismissive of the tale, by relating it, and native superstition in it, he positioned his struggle with the lions as a struggle of progress against nature. By destroying the lions and completing the railroad, the British would bring civilization to Kenya and end the reign of superstition that held the Africans back. The lions could not be allowed to prevent construction of the railroad. Patterson vowed to destroy the lions.

¹ Patterson, 21.

² Ibid.

Patterson wrote that the lions “waged an intermittent warfare against the railway.”³ By placing humans and lions in a state of war, Patterson placed himself in a position familiar to Europeans, the military hero fighting selflessly for the greater good, in this case against nature. Further by making the target of the lions “the railway” instead of the workers, he created the notion of a struggle of nature against progress. The small number of individuals who stood to profit economically from the railroad are thus obscured and displaced by a supposed benefit to all humankind. Today this deception is still used by developers to justify their destruction of nature so they can make a profit.

Patterson was singularly ineffective in his efforts to shoot the lions. At first he merely sat up at night near the scene where the last worker was eaten, often callously subjecting the body to a final indignity of being left out for a day as bait before burial. He was befuddled by the fact they never struck twice in the same place. He wrote: “At this time the various camps for the workmen were very scattered, so the lions had a range of some eight miles on either side of the Tsavo to work upon; and as their tactics seemed to be to break into a different camp each night, it was most difficult to forestall them. They appeared, too, to have an extraordinary and uncanny faculty of finding out our plans beforehand.”⁴

By attributing “tactics” to the lions, Patterson continued the sense of warfare, a military campaign, and embodied the lions with overt planning. Of course, while Patterson fumbled around trying to come up with a strategy for shooting the lions, they kept seizing workers. Nowhere in the book is there a suggestion that Patterson, or any other higher railroad official, considered shutting down work until the lions were shot.

³ Patterson, 20.

⁴ Patterson, 26.

Patterson claimed that the Indians were fatalistic about the seizures. He noted: “So long, however, as the Railhead Camp – with its two or three thousand men – scattered over a wide area, remained at Tsavo, the coolies seemed to take no notice of the dreadful deaths of their comrades. Each man felt, I suppose, that as the man-eaters had such a large number of victims to choose from, the chances of their selecting him in particular were very small.”⁵ This passage tells us more about the British view of Indians and their imperial worldview than about the Indians. It invokes a Darwinian survival strategy where a species will develop huge numbers to diminish the impact of predators upon them. As Indians and laborers, the workers are simply seen as a huge mass impassively absorbing expected losses, rather than terrified villagers transported from India into the middle of Africa where, given no protection from the British, they had no choice but to endure each terrifying night wondering if they were next. That terror was their actual experience is reflected in a letter written by one of the workers afterwards, thanking Patterson for shooting the lions. He wrote: “The lion’s roar was such that the very earth would tremble . . . On all sides arose weeping, wailing, and the people would sit and cry like cranes.”⁶

Eventually, Patterson and the workers took to putting up *bomas*, or thorn fences, around their camps. These proved ineffective as the lions managed to jump them or sneak through them. Patterson wrote: “How they forced their way through the bomas without making any noise was, and still is, a mystery to me; I should have thought that it was next to impossible for an animal to get through at all.”⁷ In other passages Patterson described the lions as “uncanny” and related that the natives thought of them as magical

⁵ Patterson, 32.

⁶ Beard, 88.

⁷ Patterson, 67.

devils. By embodying the lions with magical powers, a theme picked up on in the movie *The Ghost and the Darkness*, Patterson perpetuated another discourse about large carnivores, which is the idea that they have magical powers. The idea that one can attain physical or health benefits by consuming parts of animals sustains much of the world market demand for such animals, often met by poaching. This market may derive from earlier beliefs that magical powers could be attained by consuming the flesh of animals with magical powers. Carnivores are indeed smart and can have sophisticated hunting habits, however, in this case, their success was more a result of Patterson's ignorance of their habits than of their "uncanny" or "magical" powers. Of course, in order to maintain the façade of British superiority needed to sustain empire, Patterson could not have admitted that he was not the right person for the job.

As the weeks passed, reports of seized and eaten workers come to Patterson with "painful frequency," though work on the line continued.⁸ However, when progress on the main line proceeded to the point where the bulk of the workers moved on leaving only a few hundred left behind to finish the bridge, panic set in. The bomas were built higher and watchmen were appointed to stay up all night keeping fires burning and clanking cans to scare the lions away. Unfortunately, "the lions would not be denied."⁹ Hearing that the lions visited the newly deserted camps of the workers who had moved on, Patterson began sitting out near them. He was always mortified to hear screams from another camp "telling me only too plainly that our dreaded foes had once more eluded

⁸ Patterson, 32.

⁹ Patterson, 34.

me.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Patterson and another Englishman were able to get a couple of shots off at the lions one night, and they were frightened off for some months.

That came to an end in November when the lions returned. After another month of being stalked and eaten by lions the rail workers had enough and on December 1, 1898 they stopped work. Patterson frantically tried to trap and shoot the lions to get the work restarted. Surprisingly, it was the first time an effort was made to build “lion proof” shelters off the ground. He recorded the fear of being stalked and eaten when he wrote: “In the whole of my life I have never experienced anything more nerve-shaking than to hear the deep roars of these dreadful monsters growing gradually nearer and nearer, and to know that some one or other of us was doomed to be their next victim before morning dawned.”¹¹ Despite our vast current knowledge of the behavior and habits of large carnivores, this fear seems to persist, and perhaps understandably in populations in contact with carnivores. However, if this fear is not overcome, then demands to eradicate them are likely to doom them all.

Finally on December 9, 1898, Patterson managed to kill one of the lions. The remaining lion continued to prey upon the rail camps until Patterson shot it on December 28. Only then could bridge construction continue, and the railroad was completed in 1901. The railroad did not, of course, transform Kenya into a modern society. But, with its completion, British East Africa and Kenya in particular became a hunting safari destination attracting such luminaries as Winston Churchill, Teddy Roosevelt, and Ernest Hemingway, many of whom entertained themselves shooting game from railroad cars. This small number of safari hunters, along with “game managers” charged with pacifying

¹⁰ Patterson, 36.

¹¹ Patterson, 67.

the land for European ranchers and farmers, engaged in a vast slaughter of animals, elephants, rhinos, antelope, leopards, and lions, were all killed in their hundreds. It is staggering today to read lists of “bags” that record several hundred animals killed by a single safari. A relative handful of humans were able to eradicate nearly all the wildlife of Kenya in fifty years from 1900 to 1950. This coincided with Britain’s colonial rule, which as Peter Beard wrote was attended with “the gradual, remorseless end of the wild game.”¹²

What happened to the man-eaters? Well, Patterson skinned them and kept the relics for many years before selling them to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago where you can see them today. Research has continued and the latest theories are that the lions had dental problems, which prevented them from taking ordinary prey or that preying on humans was learned behavior from the old slave trade route from the interior to Mombasa when lions may have learned to take stragglers. The rail line followed the old slave trail. Lion social structure is ruthless. If the lions had dental problems, these two male lions would have been unable to maintain themselves in a pride, and, no doubt been driven from a pride to fend for themselves, they would have died of starvation in short order but for the fortuitous arrival of the railroad workers.

What can we learn from this story? Today Patterson’s efforts to shoot the lions while scores of Indian laborers died seems better suited for a Monty Python routine rather than for the description of him as a hunter/hero as he was originally portrayed. The myth that hunting is some type of extraordinary demonstration of masculine skill and that hunters heroically brave dangers needs to be exploded if large carnivores are to survive. In reality modern hunters are almost never in danger but for their own stupidity or

¹² Beard, 112.

ignorance. The losses caused by the man-eaters say more about the callousness of the British Empire and Patterson's ignorance of lion habits than the prowess of the lions.

Nevertheless, even if the discourses of progress versus nature, the hunter/hero, and animals with magic powers are undone, we will have to come to terms with occasional human deaths from encounters with large carnivores. Even if mainly accidental and small in number they will be distressing and sensational events. In California and other Western states today, this drama is being played out with the resurgence of mountain lions. The near eradication of mountain lions by the 1950s contributed to the now exploded deer population as deer no longer had a natural predator to keep their population in check. With restrictions on hunting mountain lions in place since the 1970s, they have slowly made a comeback. Today, it is not unusual to spot one occasionally near human populations, where they have followed the deer. The danger is of course real and people will have to modify their behavior to account for mountain lions.

But of course this danger is also greatly exaggerated. A recent report of a man killed and eaten by a mountain lion near Phoenix stated that in the last hundred years only twenty people have been reported to have been killed by mountain lions most assuredly many of those only while hunting or after provoking one. In that same period, thousands of mountain lions were certainly killed by humans. Application of our knowledge of large carnivore behavior and proper game management will surely reduce deaths to a handful, nevertheless, if we cannot reconcile ourselves to this, all the large carnivores of the world are doomed to extinction in the wild. The story of the man-eaters of Tsavo provides an entry into examination of discussion of these themes.