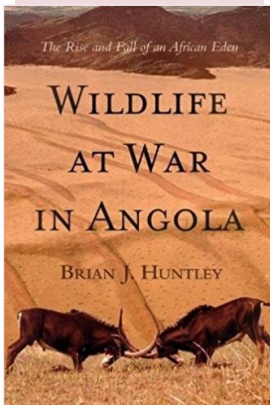


BOOK REVIEW

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The Rise And Fall Of An African Eden Wildlife At War In Angola Brian J. Huntley



THE RISE AND FALL OF
AN AFRICAN EDEN
WILDLIFE AT WAR IN
ANGOLA BRIAN J.
HUNTLEY

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'To understand Angola one must understand its history'

This reiterated comment underlies the new work that looks at a country and its politics through the lens of a scientist focussing on wildlife and the wilderness. Brian Huntley has an intimate knowledge of much of Africa, its landscapes and people. He has worked in all of sub-Saharan Africa as an ecologist, and his last position was head of the South African National Biodiversity Institute encompassing all nine botanical gardens. He has since his retirement written an illustrated history of Kirstenbosch Garden, as well as publishing his memoir of life on Marion Island as a newly graduated scientist in the 1960s.

In this, his latest work, he sets out to provide a record of his attempts to survey and consolidate land and conserve the wildlife of large areas of Angola from 1971 to 1975. As a young ecologist influenced by renowned conservationists Ian Player and Ken Tinley, he traversed the many fascinating biomes of this large and biodiverse country, which he calls 'an African Eden'.

Huntley is clearly enchanted with Angola's beauty and cares fiercely about the land and all its inhabitants. In the Preface he states: 'This book attempts to describe the Angola of the belle époque, its wildlife, its wilderness and its personalities.' He succeeds in doing so in a most readable manner, holding our attention as he juxtaposes the many varied elements of the tale. His sense of disillusion and frustration with what has failed to be achieved is strong. And dispiriting for the reader. In the final two chapters he details all that is wrong with Angola and proposes certain radical solutions, including the very urgent need to try to wrest back the wilderness and wildlife, from the ravages of colonial and civil war, followed by a kleptocratic, corrupt political order.

The 396-page book is made easy to navigate by its division into four distinct chronological sections, beginning with 'The Halcyon Years'. This is a nostalgic memoir of the four years he and his wife lived there, in remote areas of this huge country. In the course of working with various young Angolans, he forged enduring professional relations with a number of significant players. Huntley has successfully maintained contact – if erratic – over forty years of turmoil and war. Once South Africa was no longer persona non grata, he was able to pick up with old colleagues – a remarkable feat in itself given the very limited communications and opportunities for keeping such relationships alive. His exploration of this pristine wilderness

describes then existing – if unformalised – conservancies of the early seventies. The account moves easily between different topics, beginning with the Quiçama National Park, and the historical record of the Cuanza River running through it. This is followed by a full account of the magnificent giant sable antelope, with 60 inch horns, the icon of Angola much pursued by trophy hunters. There

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is a rollicking narrative of the people linked to the exploration of the habitat and exploitation of this rare and elusive animal over the past hundred years. An interlude chapter deals with ‘The Enigmatic Living Fossil of the Namib’, an extraordinary desert plant aptly named *Welwitschia mirabilis*. The Iona National Park in the dry deep south is next, and is clearly his favourite locale. He lays claim to it being ‘Africa’s Last Wilderness’. Then comes a necessary digression to ‘The Cattle Wars – Politics and Personalities’ in Chapter 6, that excoriates supposed conservationists under colonial rule: ‘Our first meeting on 24 June 1972 proved to be something of a pissing contest between veterinarians claiming to be born-again

conservationists. But the façade soon dropped’ and he goes on to say that a certain individual ‘...was a goat specialist and behaved like one’ (P93). Huntley is not afraid of pulling his punches; his inside track knowledge, historical and current observations and residents’ information all render his tough talk credible. This part ends with pragmatic conservation proposals, ‘The Art of the Possible’, made to a receptive administration at the end of the colonial era in 1974.

‘...sorrow was the overwhelming passenger on the backs of most Angolans’...

Part 2: ‘A Short History of a Very Long War’ is an eminently readable account of the 500 years of disastrous history that has brought Angola, its wildlife and people to its present untenable situation. It runs from the period of intensive slavery – ‘a Recipe for Disaster’ – through the rebellion and retribution of the colonial era, followed by the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and, worse, the proxy wars fought in southern Africa during the Cold War. This fraught narrative is leavened by a chapter: ‘Interlude: The 100-year Odyssey of the Thirstland Trekkers’, a particular interest that he has pursued over the past forty years. It leads naturally onto a description of ‘An Angolan Exodus – August 1975’ wherein he provides a first-person account of the last refugee column of 10 000 people travelling south, reversing the previous trek, as they abandoned a country about to plunge into chaos.

Huntley writes in a clear, readable prose style. Given his first-hand experience, bolstered by extensive personal records, his Angolan political and conservation contacts, coupled with his wide reading of the available literature, he presents a credible case- for concern and dismay. (There is a fairly extensive bibliography on the various topics, both English and Portuguese, as well as a map – which could have been reproduced in more detail to cover unmarked locations in specific chapters.) While the book is a personal memoir, the writing is unemotional, setting out the facts rather than providing analysis or commentary- as one would expect from a natural scientist. That it is a comprehensive survey of wildlife management is without question. But it is also a comprehensive political history, this despite the many competing versions of events dealing with the liberation struggle (1961–1974), the proxy war (1975–1991), and

the two civil wars (1992–1994; 1998–2002). This book provides an informed and balanced insight into what will remain for most readers an unknown country.

The third section deals with wildlife conservation in a time of war. Unlike Garth Owen Smith, who successfully pioneered community conservation in neighbouring Namibia despite many travails and setbacks, Huntley and Angolan wildlife were not as fortunate. Much of this section makes for an engrossing but despairing read. Namibia was spared forty years of the time of great confusion or ‘*confusão*’ in Angola. It is a stable country today, with a thriving and lucrative conservation sector, unlike neighbouring Angola, naturally endowed with a far greater wealth of biodiversity, landscape and wildlife. Instead, Angola has emerged from the ‘*confusão*’ as a rentier kleptocracy, bedevilled by the ‘Resource Curse’ – in this instance oil and diamonds – and the ‘Culture of Greed’.

The city-state of Luanda now has as many inhabitants as the entire country had when Huntley lived there – over 6 million. This chapter dealing with the superficial glitz of the capital and the impoverishment and neglect of the vast rural areas, makes for sobering reading. The war drove the citizens to the city, which itself ‘has no connection with the country’s abundant wealth. For a full generation and more, the urban populations of Angola had been isolated from the country’s wilderness by bullets and bombs, landmines, sieges and starvation. The war has left the urban Angolan with a deep fear and loathing of the bush – the *mato*. Nature is not in the frame of reference of the urban youth. It explains an almost total absence of environmental sensitivity and responsibility across all sectors of Angolan society.’ (P243)

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A final chapter in this Part 3 entitled ‘Friends Lost and Found’ exposes more of his deep-felt sympathy and identification with the country and colleagues of yore, but does not fit easily – at least to this reviewer.

Part 4, the final section, deals with ‘Wildlife Conservation in the Twenty-First Century’. Chapter 19 is headed ‘Triage Conservation – Option of Last Resort’ and makes for depressing reading. He tells of a 4 000km circuit in 2014, ‘from the desert of Namibe to the rainforest of Uige, and back across the panalto of Huambo and Huila...[where] bushmeat traders had a wide range of forest animals hanging from their makeshift stalls – bushbuck, blue duiker, monkeys and pangolin. All staked out – fresh, wet and bloody – to be sold to passing Chinese truckers. The miombo woodlands of the 1970s had been converted into charcoal, the rainforests stripped of their rare timber trees. Is this the end game for Angola’s wildlife?’ (P274) In the same vein, quoting a fellow distinguished ecologist, he shares his pessimism... ‘What I see are inadequate parks, unstable societies, and faltering institutions. Nature cannot long survive any of these debilities: all three in combination add up to a recipe for extinction’. (P 275) (John Terborough, 2004: Requiem for Nature, Island Press, Washington DC).

Confronted with this critical state of biodiversity in Angola, he proposes a number of practical suggestions, some of which he initiated in the 1970s, for example, strengthening the management effectiveness of the existing network of protected areas. He then digresses into a comparative overview of fauna and flora narratives for South Africa and Angola – of which the latter is ‘critically bereft’. He asserts:

‘The country is breathtakingly beautiful and extraordinarily diverse. Each corner has its own charm and drama.’ (P282) And accordingly proposes a principle of ‘strategic opportunism’ whereby biodiversity ‘hotspots’ most worthy of conserving are identified. He lists six main categories. He has himself led a number of scientific expeditions into Angola in the past 10 years, as well as facilitating biodiversity

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training of young Angolans in 2009. International funding is readily available. But conflicting agendas abound. Misguided efforts have resulted in the relocation and introduction of animals that never occurred there! There is negligible on-going appropriate training and support for scanty personnel on the ground. Boundaries are ill defined. Special political and financial interests override conservation priorities. Indigenous game stock has been decimated by bush meat hunting during the long years of the UNITA/ Jonas Savimbi (SA-supported) civil war with MPLA. The large sums of available donor money attract interest from government departments that fail, at best, to utilise them effectively.

In the penultimate chapter, entitled ‘The State of the Game – the Era of “Paper Parks”’ he asks a number of questions that interrogate why, since the peace of 2002,

the protected areas have shown so few signs of recovery and effective management. Instead, Luandan bureaucrats have frustrated initiatives, abused the legislative status of national parks and the regulations governing their protection with impunity, and the visible active illegal trade in wildlife and hardwoods continues unabated. Parks exist on paper – no more than that. Huntley asserts ‘The thesis of this chapter is that it is the failure of governance – the complete and deliberate abdication of personal responsibility, the lack of accountability and transparency, and the pervasive culture of denial and of obfuscation – that have been the principle barriers to the recovery of the nation’s protected areas and its biodiversity. The truth is clear: the wilderness of Angola is dying a slow death, a death by a thousand cuts.’ (P364)

In Chapter 24, ‘Angola Adieu? Will Hope be the Last Thing to Die?’ he quotes from a 40-page report compiled in 2015 by the UNDP international advisor to the Global Environmental Fund project, which demonstrates how little contact was made on the ground with actual national parks. He goes further to say that the national parks are in a chaotic and critical state, and then proposes a number of recommendations to consolidate existing conservation areas and target key biodiversity hotspots, naming effective projects and people. Into this gloomy picture the writer introduces a final, radical option of last resort asserting ‘the government entity that has shown the greatest interest in and offered the most effective support to conservation action in Angola during the past two decades has been the most improbable: the military...has the best-financed, best-equipped and best-trained corps of professionals of any sector of government.’ (P392) An astonishing claim!

Huntley has successfully realised his first aim, to record the past. One hopes that his second aim, to inspire a new generation of custodians of the natural environment, is realised and that this book receives the readership it warrants.