

PART IV
On Our
Watch

*The superior man understands what is right;
The inferior man understands what will sell.*

— CONFUCIUS



Road Trip

THIS WATER HAS COME A LONG, LONG WAY. It began, if water can be said to begin at all, as the breath of the great Congo basin. It fell first in the remote highlands of Zambia, emerging under a young strangler fig as a tiny spring you can step across. It rushes, grows, loops through Angola and back again. The young river forms the boundary of the Caprivi Strip, that strange extension of desert Namibia the Germans created to give them access to these waters. Already the great Zambezi is reaching out to shape the land and the people around it. There is still a thousand miles to go.

Plunging east it runs out of stone and hurls itself into space. This is The Smoke That Thunders, Victoria Falls, largest singular waterfall on the planet. David Livingstone walked this river to its mouth in the 1850s, becoming the first white man to see them. Now in Zimbabwe it tumbles through deep, dry clefts before the waters fade into the vast quiet of Lake Kariba. The work of the river is not done yet: it emerges, is joined by the Luangwa to flow into Mozambique. The rush and bustle of the high country is gone now, and the water spreads itself fat and lazy across the landscape.

In the end, as great rivers do, it stops fighting with the earth and they become one, a vast sprawling delta with four channels whose names ring with African magic — the Chinde, Kongone, Luabo and Timbwe. From here the river finally meets the sea, its power still enough to push a plume of soil 30 kilometres into the Indian Ocean. That bloom is so great that it can be seen from space. To get there it has passed through arid gorges, fertile farmland and fishing villages, over the great falls and into history.

And it is right here, on the vast green plain of the river in its old age, that the greatest of modern hunting stories is playing out as you read these words.



Africa is where things happen first, our canary in the coalmine. It was there that the great re-wildings began, an idea that has since spread across the world. It was there, too, that the anti-hunting backlash really went global. And now perhaps there is an experiment that will echo everywhere.

A lifetime ago the Thozo people lived quietly in the lush wetlands of central Mozambique. Not far from their huts herds of buffalo wandered in the swamps, and lions ghosted through the woodlands and their margins. Antelope of every stripe grazed and leapt on the short grass plains and in the dappled miombo forest.

It was then a haunt of great hunting names. Wally Johnson was the survivor of buffalo horns, floods, rocket attacks, even Fred Bear and Robert Ruark. Walking back to camp one day through thick bush he felt what he thought was a thorn, but looked down to see a Gaboon viper locked to his leg. Imagine the nastiest arrow-headed snake you can think of, and then imagine it again, because the Gaboon is way worse than anything you can dream up. 4–5 feet long, fat but muscular, it has the greatest venom yield of any snake in the world — and one of the fastest strikes.

He shook the 2-inch fangs out of his flesh, walked back to camp and, despite the pain, administered antivenin. He then drove himself to a timber mill about 20 miles away. From there, he was driven to a clinic and then to a bigger hospital in Rhodesia. He insisted, at length, that his leg not be amputated. It took him nine months to recover — and then he went hunting again. His career would go on to span sixty years.

As a colonial power, Portugal never did much with Mozambique. When revolution swept across Africa in 1977 it simply gave up. It held no election, no referendum. A handover period of just months and they were out, one of the poorest exits ever. To any student of history what came next is as inevitable as the rising of the sun.

Marxist forces took control, pushing for a one-party state. To nobody's surprise they ended up fighting anti-communist resistance, a bitter Cold War in the bush. Both sides were puppets to wider forces, and neither respected any rule of war. Infrastructure was smashed, and you can guess the rest. Landmines. Child soldiers. Slavery. Crackdowns. Mass abductions. Forced moves to state-controlled communal farms.

More than a million Mozambicans perished, 5 million displaced. Hundreds of thousands died of famine. In the bush, wildlife was decimated to feed the military — rumour has it that gunships even strafed the swamp buffalo, with the carcasses airlifted to Soviet ships offshore. It could have gone on forever. In a place so big, a population spread so thinly, it was

impossible for either side to land a knockout punch. It ended only when the Soviet Union fell and the government's support evaporated.

A peace accord finally landed in 1992. Just two years later, a young hunter named Mark Haldane chanced his arm and bought the lease for the old Coutada 11 concession. On that block was the heart of the Marrromeu wetlands and the shattered home of the Thozo people. There were fewer than fifty sable antelope and perhaps a thousand buffalo left on 1 million acres. The beautiful bush species like nyala had disappeared. The forests were full of snares and traps for small antelope, and signs of civil war were everywhere. The big predators were gone, starved out, shot out.

'I was young and stupid, I guess. It was my first chance to actually lease a hunting concession. It was a heart thing, for sure. It was wild, but the game had been blitzed and poached beyond recognition. Even the brick walls that line our runway were chipped by mortars and bullets.'

He opened a hunting camp anyway. There's an old joke among professional hunters that 'PH' stands for 'Perhaps Hungry', and those first few seasons were lean for sure. But he knew that animals drift towards good habitat and protection. When they did come in, he had to look after them. He invested his time and resources in anti-poaching patrols and building relationships with local people.



Mark is an interesting guy. He's passionate about game birds and gun dogs, and we hit it off right away. We talk Labradors and pointers, friends we have in common, other good things. He's guided all over the world, including New Zealand and Australia.

The wilderness he manages is staggering, running to the horizon. Out on the plain, on any given day, you might spot a dazzle of Selous zebra in the distance. Unlike the common zebra, their stripes have no shadows and run right to the hooves. They are critically endangered. Down to just five in 1994, this block now holds 1000. They are named for Frederick Courteney Selous, whose schoolmaster in England once found him lying on a bare floor to sleep. A great reader of Livingston's writing, young Selous told his teacher that one day he would be a hunter in Africa, and that he was hardening himself to sleep on the ground. That boy was ten years old.

Tell me it's not in the blood. Ten years later that boy began a career as a hunter, soldier and explorer across remote Africa, venturing into places that had never seen a white man before. He became a close friend of US President Teddy Roosevelt, and won the Distinguished Service Order. Much



The Hunter, oil on canvas, Peter Stewart

of his work was devoted to conserving the Africa he saw slipping away. The 50,000 square kilometre Selous Reserve in Tanzania, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is named for him. That is where the flighted arrow found its mark at last: he is buried there.

The delta is a mix of sand forest, tropical savannah, swamps and floodplain — a powerhouse for life of all kinds. Impossibly elegant nyala and bushbuck drift through the forest shadows, while red duiker, suni and blue duiker move on tiptoe in the dense bush. In other parts of their range these little guys are hammered by habitat loss and commercial bush-meat poaching.

Reedbuck, hippo, crocodile and waterbuck haunt the floodplain. You can't go five minutes without seeing warthog, bush pig, Lichtenstein's hartebeest. Far away the bulk of an eland bull stands still as stone, then trots away with a relaxed, swinging gait. And out on the plain, running like coal-black racehorses, are the sable. From the starting-point of fifty there are 4000 today, the biggest population in Africa.

Inevitably there are buffalo herds moving at a steady pace, with their snowy-white cattle egrets overhead. The latest aerial survey showed 25,000

buff in the ecosystem. 'Seeing them come back, I cannot tell you how much pleasure it gives me. Everything you see here and on the neighboring blocks is the work of hunting outfits. The animals have come back, even the shy ones. It's now at capacity. But the first thing that breaks in a natural environment like this is the circle of life. We had one link missing.' He is thoughtful for a moment. 'The big predators.'

Mike Toft got one of the tough jobs. As veterinarian for the project, he had to find two dozen wild lions with diverse genetics, dart them safely, then test for any disease. Tranquillise again, and move them onto light aircraft for their final journey to Mozambique. 'Darting them,' he says ruefully, 'actually getting them down into the trailers, then into the aircraft . . . that was a mission.' The project would be the largest international relocation of wild lions in history.

The eyes of big cats don't close when they are sedated so the lions were blindfolded to protect them from sunlight. If the tranquiliser started to wear off, the blindfold might just keep them calm and buy a little time. It must have been a hell of a moment for the pilot, to look back at his stripped-down cabin and see nothing but lions stacked like sardines, no cages. This is when you hope the vet got his sums right on the tranqs, because if those boys and girls wake up at 5000 feet things might get interesting. One of them — a young male — did in fact start to wake, head up and mouth open. The five minutes it took for the top-up drug to take effect must have dragged.

After two hours in the air, the planes were greeted by a crowd of locals, headed by Chief Jorge Tenente Thozo. When he was a child there were lions wandering freely on the delta, but they disappeared in the bush war. That's an echo of what is happening everywhere across Africa. Today lions have maybe a quarter of their historic range left. He knew there would be no fences between his people and the big cats. They had talked it through. Many of his younger people had never seen a lion before, and so there was both excitement and fear as the predators were offloaded.

'We made a ceremony for my ancestors to introduce the lions,' says Jorge. He laid out offerings of tobacco and beer. His is the final word. 'We will live happily with them.'

After a careful settling-in period, one group was placed in a loose circle far out on the green grass of the delta. The antidotes were given, and the Cruisers backed off. The lions woke to find themselves young, healthy, in an ocean of forest, grass and antelope. They will be studied, tracked, never hunted.

Welcome to lion paradise.



Meat drop to local people, Zambeze Delta Safaris, Mozambique.

Things like this don't generally happen in Africa or anywhere else. Whole governments fail at work like this, even in their own national parks — and it's worth stressing that Zambeze Delta is a hunting block, not a national park. 'We started out with our resident hunters doing anti-poaching in their spare time. Our first full-time unit was five rangers, all professionally trained. They were all ex-poachers, and are still our section leaders today. They're on a salary, which most had never seen in their lives. The job gives them status. They do three-day missions to arrest poachers, take down snares and confiscate gin traps. But despite what you see on cable TV, that will never eliminate poaching completely. You have to help people change, too. We knew that.'

'We started meat-drops in 2001. We shoot and deliver the whole animal — mostly common reedbuck — but are selective about picking exactly the right animal and making it a swift, humane end. All of the meat is used. The hundreds of wire snares and gin traps our anti-poaching unit have picked up are nothing like that. Snared animals die a long, horrible death, and many are left to rot. It's a sad thing to see.'

'We imported a corn mill, which gives the people independence from



Shadows on the grass — sable, Zambeze Delta Safaris, Mozambique.

merchants. That plus the meat-drops have made a difference to village life. Through clients we've put in a small school and medical support. The well means people don't have to go near croc water. You know, we've had poachers surrender their own traps for reward. Today, among the people here, it's not worth the risk of bringing down the wrath of village elders by poaching. The animals are worth something to these people now.'

It's been two years since the lions were released. Fifteen of them had tracking collars and are monitored constantly by Willem Briers-Louw, resident scientist at Zambeze Delta. One died in a snare, but already there are more than forty cubs on the ground. I asked Willem what the lion population will get to. 'Well, you look at the size of an area and calculate carnivore-carrying capacity. There are parts of the delta that aren't really suitable for lions, particularly some of the swamp habitat. That area includes thousands of buffalo and waterbuck. But even if we exclude these animals, we're still looking at 500–800 lions on the delta. That would contribute between 2 and 3.5 per cent to the entire African lion population. If we get to 800, this one project will contribute 68 per cent to the current Mozambican lion population.'

I'm taking a team of Kiwis, an Aussie and a lady from Germany to the delta. We're all there to hunt buffalo, but also to see how the project works. None of the team is wealthy, just everyday people so passionate that they are willing to save up, for years if necessary, to experience something like this. We'll be slogging the swamps and cursing the tsetse flies. But we will also be taking meat to local villages, and meeting the anti-poaching unit. And with luck they will also discover something I found a long time ago. We all know lions, right? On TV, at the zoo? Well, if you walk into a lion in the wild, sitting on his kill, the rules change. He is no longer entertainment. He will look you in the eye and you will feel it.

They are all very different people, but share something in common. It's hard to put a label on it. The best I can say is this: if you live in the developed world — a comfortable home, malls and movies, all the rest — it's a nice life. But we're not built for a nice life, it spoils us. A few people instinctively search for a little strife. We know that being scared sometimes is good for you, that life should hurt from time to time. So here's to all of us silly bastards making it harder than it needs to be, just to live properly.



In New Zealand we walk and glass and walk and glass, because finding a lot of our species is hard work. After all that effort, the actual hunt can be an anti-climax. Most of them simply fall to a good shot. None of them is dangerous in the true sense. Buff are different. If they're around they are not that hard to find. Even if they have a sense you're out there somewhere, they might just decide that the herd is bigger and tougher than you — and they'd be right, because your four cartridges won't go far in a standoff with 400 buffalo. You had better come correct.

It is fairly easy to kill a buffalo, but it is hard to convince him of that fact. They seldom fall to the shot, even if it's a good one. They can keep going for a very long time after being hit by something that would flatten a small building. And they might just try to kill you if the circumstances are right. Even if they don't, their friends might come boiling out of the 3-metre swamp grass and try to kill you anyway. Even if you're minding your own business in a truck, they sometimes try to kill one of those too.

In passing I ask Mark about jackals. He says they have seen just a single side-striped jackal in twenty-five years. I'm very surprised — various species are everywhere in southern Africa — and quiz him on why that would be. It sparked something. Willem is looking into their original distribution in the area. If they were truly endemic, bringing them back is now on the radar.



The Wall. Buffalo on the floodplain, Zambeze Delta Safaris, Mozambique.

The side-striped is a handsome little canine with a mixed diet of insects, fruit and small animals. They are far less predatory than black-backed jackal. Even so, no game ranch would bring a predator back, which is what makes an ecosystem project like this so different.

And maybe — in some small way — I've left a faint fingerprint of my own on a corner of Africa.



It's late, and around camp are the sounds of the night — insects humming, hyenas whooping. Somewhere out there in the sawgrass and papyrus thousands of buffalo jaws are lazily chewing while lions walk the dry game trails, patrolling what is now theirs. A tom leopard faces the earth to savour his rasping cough. In the thickets small antelope pause at the sound, tremulous in the dark.

Mark gazes into the embers, seeing what we all see there. The past and the present wrapped up as one. Ourselves, reflected. Somewhere in there is the young man who gambled it all on a dream that has come wildly, spectacularly true. All it took was decade after decade of his life, risk, persistence, imagination. He's the man who found a way.

This is the best of us.

