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CONSERVATION PROPAGANDA IN SOUTH AFRICA? THE CASE OF LAURENS VAN DER POST, THE DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION AND THE NATIONAL PARKS BOARD.

ABSTRACT

This article examines correspondence in the archives of the South African National Parks relating to a television film, "All Africa within us", that Sir Laurens van der Post made for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in various South African nature reserves in 1974. The correspondence reveals that The South African Department of Information, supported by Dr Piet Koornhof, who was friendly with Van der Post, helped arrange the visit, expecting that Van der Post would provide favourable coverage of South African conservation efforts and thus, indirectly, of the National Party. The article reveals the complex interplay of motives between the Parks Board, Van der Post, the Department of Information and the BBC. It shows that the Kruger Park authorities were suspicious of filmmakers and wished to control the products by, for example, asking for scripts in advance. Van der Post's letters and later commentary by his producer suggest that he changed his emphasis and focus considerably from the outset to the final production. The most fruitful approach to such productions may be in Actor-Network theory which tries to show the importance of different agents in controlling, or failing to control, a cultural product. Attempts to see conservation films as simple propaganda or political statement, the article argues, are misplaced and simplify the complexities.

Keywords: *Eschel Rhoodie; Van der Post; BBC; Wilderness Foundation; wildlife documentary; South African National Parks; Kruger Park; rhino conservation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Critics of conservation in Southern Africa and more generally see it as a colonial imposition that disregards the rights of indigenous people and creates a myth of unpeopled landscapes.¹ This criticism has been extended to wildlife documentaries as a portrayal of an artificial wilderness space that ignores the extent to which indigenous peoples have been omitted from the landscape, how human interventions shape that space or how filmmakers use various forms of artifice to create the media product.²

The South African situation is particularly interesting because wildlife documentaries started flourishing in South Africa and South-West Africa during the 1970s when the struggle for Namibian independence was being fought, and social upheaval in South Africa followed the Soweto uprising of 1976. This was a period in which David and Carol Hughes, arguably the leading wildlife filmmakers of their generation, won the top British wildlife documentary award, a Golden Panda, in 1978 for their film about the Namib made at a National Parks Board base, not far from a combat zone. What was the relationship between political and social upheaval, conservation, and wildlife films?

Correspondence in the South African National Parks (SANParks) archives, both in their Groenkloof headquarters in Pretoria and in the Kruger Park archives in Skukuza, reveals that the Department of Information, the controversial body that sought aggressively to influence internal and external coverage of South Africa, saw South Africa's conservation record as something that could be used to improve the image of the country abroad.³ They tried to facilitate the making of television programmes that would give a positive message about South Africa and its national parks.

The most interesting case study involves a television programme made for the BBC by Laurens van der Post, the South African novelist, travel writer and filmmaker who had moved from South Africa to England. Van der Post's rise to the rank of Colonel during his service in the Second World War, his travel writing, and his critical account of how the "Bushmen" were being

1 L Meskell, *The nature of heritage : the new South Africa* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); J Mbaria and M Ogada, *The big conservation lie: the untold story of wildlife conservation in Kenya* (Washington: Lens and Pens, 2016); W Beinart and P Coates, *Environment and history: The taming of nature in the USA and South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2002).

2 D Bousé, *Wildlife films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); C Chris, *Watching wildlife* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); JC Horak, "Wildlife documentaries: From classical forms to reality TV", *Film History, An International Journal* 18 (4), 2006.

3 M Rees and C Day, *Muldergate: The Story of the info scandal* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1980).

treated in Southern Africa in his 1955 television series and in various books had made him a highly regarded commentator on Southern Africa in the United Kingdom and internationally.

The previously unexamined correspondence related to his filming in South Africa throws an interesting light onto Van der Post's political stance in the 1970s, a time in which he was involved in various political initiatives involving South Africa and its relationships with Britain. It also shows how the National Party was trying to modernise itself and shed the image of racial *baasskap* [literally boss-hood but generally meaning white racial domination] and, particularly, how the Department of Information and the Department of Foreign Affairs tried to shape international views of South Africa.⁴

The correspondence also reveals the tensions and difficulties involved in the project because of the different expectations and agendas of Van der Post, the Department of Information, and the National Parks Board. It also suggests that there were different views within the ruling National Party because of differing interpretations of what kinds of message about the country were permissible and desirable.⁵ Understanding some of this background helps understand frictions and tensions in this correspondence. In particular, it suggests that the experience of the Kruger Park with previous filmmakers made them reluctant participants at best in the project and shows that the Department of Information had very little control over the content. These tensions suggest that any attempt to see wildlife films as propaganda underestimates the complex interactions involved.

2. POLITICAL MESSAGING, THE DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION AND CONSERVATION

While the National Party in the early 1970s was in a powerful position, after a decade of strong economic growth, and faced little internal opposition, it realised that old-style racial apartheid could no longer be defended. It thus sought to modernise its message to suit an era of decolonisation, particularly by developing a message of anti-communism.⁶ The Department

4 JDF Jones, *Storyteller : the many lives of Laurens Van der Post* (London: John Murray, 2001); J Sanders, *Apartheid's friends: the rise and fall of South Africa's secret service* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 2006).

5 H Gillomee, *The Afrikaners : biography of a people* (London: C. Hurst, 2003); PE Louw, *The rise, fall, and legacy of apartheid* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004); J Miller, *An African folk : the apartheid regime and its search for survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

6 H Adam, *Modernising racial domination : South Africa's political dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Miller, *An African folk : the apartheid regime and its search for survival*.

of Information in the early 1970s attempted to use a wide range of tactics and figures to change perceptions of South Africa, particularly in the USA. One area where Western views of South Africa were positive was in the area of conservation. Jamie Miller writes of their work in “producing glossy brochures on South Africa’s wildlife and economy” as a surface activity, but they aimed to do more.⁷

In Natal, at the Umfolozi Game Reserve where he was Warden, Ian Player’s success in “saving” the white rhino and the re-establishing of a flourishing population in the Kruger National Park had been celebrated in documentaries, Player’s own books and even became the stuff of Hollywood film in *Hatari!*⁸ The German naturalist Bernhard Grzimek also helped shape Western perceptions at the time with his *Serengeti Shall Not Die!* – a film that successfully attacked a utilitarian British attempt to parcel out the migratory route of wildebeest to indigenous farmers.⁹ So, as the world became concerned about the South African “trusteeship” of South-West Africa, one of the ways to argue for the benefits of white South African control over the area was to point to wildlife conservation.

The mission of the Department of Information was to exploit contacts who were sympathetic to South Africa by presenting a more modern, “*verlig*” or enlightened view of the apartheid system. Their attempt to influence positive foreign coverage involved a range of methods, including attempting to buy the *Washington Star*, but in this minor case of getting an endorsement of South African conservation from a respected critic of South Africa, we can see the delicate negotiations involved.

In the South Africa of the early 1970s, Afrikaner power was at its zenith. The National Party was also drawing an increasing number of English-speaking voters who, particularly after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Rhodesia in 1965 had come to see the United Kingdom, the traditional reference point for the opposition United Party – by the 1974 election in disarray – far more critically. English speakers were being drawn into a more inclusive anti-communist white hegemony, something the Department of Information tried to capitalise on by secretly funding a new English language newspaper, *The Citizen*, to push a pro-government line.¹⁰ Within Afrikanerdom, there were tensions on how much of the traditional basis of Afrikaner nationalism in the historical experience of Afrikaners and their

7 Miller, *An African folk : the apartheid regime and its search for survival*, p. 93.

8 I Player and N Steele, *Zululand wilderness: Shadow and soul* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1997); SJ Brooks, *Changing nature: A critical historical geography of the Umfolozi* (PhD, Queen’s University Kingston, 2001).

9 T Lekan, “Serengeti shall not die: Bernhard Grzimek, wildlife film, and the making of a tourist landscape in East Africa”, *German History* 29 (2), 2011.

10 Rees and Day, *Muldergate: The Story of the info scandal*.

religious identity and anti-colonial struggle could be adapted to a new defence of white power.

3. VAN DER POST

In the 1970s, Laurens van der Post was the best-known British-based commentator on Southern Africa and its racial problems, largely as a result of his films of the “Bushmen” and his novels. In the 1950s, his anti-communist Buchanesque novel, *Flamingo Feather* had been successful enough to tempt Alfred Hitchcock to envisage making a film of it and visiting South Africa to explore that possibility. Later critics have treated his novels and ethnographic films more suspiciously.¹¹

By 1974, he was attempting to influence South Africa through his friendship with Piet Koornhof, the South African cabinet minister who had been a Rhodes Scholar and earned a PhD in anthropology from Oxford University. Jones examines the evidence that suggests that Van der Post was instrumental in securing the release of fellow Gray College old boy Bram Fischer, Nelson Mandela’s lawyer at the Rivonia trial and secretly head of the illegal Communist Party in South Africa, from prison in the last year of his life through interventions that Koornhof presented to Cabinet.¹² At the same time, Van der Post was arguing for continued sporting engagement with South Africa by supporting the contentious 1974 Lions Rugby tour to South Africa.

Van der Post was also friendly with Player with whom he set up the Wilderness Foundation, a conservation Non-Governmental Organisation, in 1972. As the correspondence shows, the projected television programme was originally envisaged as being about saving rhinos which would have involved Player’s collaboration.

4. KRUGER PARK AND WILDLIFE DOCUMENTARY

One of the puzzles in understanding the history of African wildlife documentary is why the Kruger Park, the continent’s premier wildlife tourist destination, was so little used for documentary filming.¹³ An examination of the relevant archive

11 EN Wilmsen, “Primal anxiety, sanctified landscapes: the imagery of primitiveness in the ethnographic fictions of Laurens van der Post”, *Visual Anthropology* 15 (2), 2002; L Van Vuuren, “The many myths of Laurens van der Post: Van der Post and Bushmen in the television series *Lost World of Kalahari* (1958)”, *South African Historical Journal* 48 (1), 2003.

12 Jones, *Storyteller*, pp. 332-33.

13 Evidence from the Kruger Park is drawn from several box files in the Skukuza archive, numbered NK27 entitled *Publiteit* in films. The box files are loosely arranged by date.

in Skukuza, the administrative headquarters and main camp in the Kruger Park, shows that James Stevenson-Hamilton, first warden, tried very early on to persuade the Board to support a proposal from British wildlife filmmaker Ratcliffe Holmes to work in the park, but the proposal failed because of financial difficulties and Ratcliffe Holmes's wish to use other destinations and promote himself. Perhaps because of the failure of this attempt, Stevenson-Hamilton himself did not seem to approach any other filmmakers. There are tantalising glimpses of near misses such as a 1938 approach by the leading English wildlife filmmaker Cherry Kearton, whose second wife was South African, with a response from Stevenson-Hamilton about fees for filming, but that collaboration did not materialise.

By 1945, there were clearly tensions between the South African Railways and Harbour authorities, who were then largely responsible for encouraging international tourism, and the Kruger authorities. A major tension emerged: who controlled the images emanating from the country's leading tourist attraction at a time when the park could be used to help burnish South Africa's international reputation?

The park rangers and authorities had ways of resisting outside pressure and demands from local and international filmmakers. In 1948, for example, ranger Orpen objected to a planned Afrimerica expedition, and their claim that they would increase publicity and tourists. For Orpen, this was an American money-making project likely to distract rangers from their real jobs, and his view seems to have been typical of those in the front line.

The head of the National Parks Board and the head warden of Kruger had to take different priorities into account when confronted by requests. They had to answer to various Boards but also consider the feelings and reactions of subordinates and the other priorities of the park. There were three areas where intending visitors sought favourable filming conditions and were usually rebuffed. For optimal filming, they needed off-road access, access after normal park hours, and the aid of knowledgeable rangers. These requests recur over several decades and the head warden or local rangers were usually able to say that other priorities did not make these requests possible. To allow off-road or after-hours access would set a bad example for general tourists and the rangers were too busy with their normal duties to be able to spend time guiding filmmakers. In general, they also turned down requests to make films focusing on the rangers.

There were also concerns about the image of the park and concerns that certain content might not reflect favourably on what authorities saw as their serious scientific mission. Jane Carruthers has described how the authorities after 1948 increasingly saw their mission in scientific and "command and

control” terms.¹⁴ This shift meant that by the 1970s there were perennial concerns about the unfavourable presentation of elephant culling, for example. Another revealing letter was regarding the Jamie Uys film, *Beautiful People*, where the Kruger allowed filming but under the condition that the film would not make any reference to the park in the credits, clearly feeling that comedy or a feeling of “onrustigheid” [disturbance] was not a suitable tone.¹⁵ There was also the general issue of who should benefit financially from any filming in the park. The rapid development of wildlife filming in Southern Africa stemmed in large part from the rise of private lodges such as Londolozi where filmmakers could go off-road, work outside normal viewing hours, and have, or in fact be, specialised guides.¹⁶

These institutional habits meant that the National Parks Board and Kruger authorities expected and enjoyed quite considerable autonomy, something demonstrated in the interplay between Eschel Rhoodie of the Department of Information, Laurens van der Post, and the National Parks Board and Kruger National Park.

5. A CASE STUDY – THE VAN DER POST FILM

On 1 January 1974, Laurens van der Post wrote from London to Rocco Knobel, then head of the National Parks Board, setting out a request to make a film in the Kruger and Kalahari Gemsbok Parks.¹⁷ Some twenty letters were then exchanged between Van der Post, Knobel, Tol Pienaar, head of the Kruger, and the South African Department of Information which supported Van der Post’s request. One letter to Knobel was written and signed by Eschel Rhoodie, the Secretary of the Department of Information and a controversial central figure in the Muldergate scandal that cost Connie Mulder the leadership of the National Park and the Prime Ministership.

In his letter, Van der Post starts by reminding Knobel of a brief meeting years before where he had given Knobel a copy of *Flamingo Feather* as a gift, but then starts putting on institutional pressure through judicious name-dropping, before moving to personal flattery:

I would never have presumed, after one brief meeting, writing to you unless I had been encouraged by Dr De Wet [Carel de Wet was the South African Ambassador to the United Kingdom] and his staff here to do so.

14 J Carruthers, “Conservation and wildlife management in South African national parks 1930s–1960s”, *Journal of the History of Biology* 41 (2), 2008.

15 Letter from TWS Meyer of Jamie Uys productions to the Director of the National Parks Board, 9 March, 1966, Skukuza Archives, NK 27.

16 I Glenn, ““Silent Hunter” and its influence on wildlife documentary”, *Communitas* 23, 2018.

17 All these letters are in Skukuza archive, NK27.

You may have heard by now that the Department of information has cleared a project which I propose doing for BBC television. I have been trying for many years to get the BBC interested in South Africa in a non-political way, and it has been extremely hard work. But I did a few months ago get the agreement to let me make a film on the immense amount South Africa has done for conservation of wildlife and flora of its own. It is a story that has never been properly told on the screen in the English-speaking world in spite of the admirable films that your own Department of information have produced in that regard.

I myself want to do it comprehensively and also to make certain that it is not done by the wrong people and slanted to a wrong end. The story, of course, would not be complete without your own very great contribution to this cause and I am writing to ask if you would allow me to come and do some filming for about a fortnight towards the beginning of May in the Kruger Park; then for perhaps a week or so in the Gemsbok Kalahari park as well.

Van der Post then moves to the typical demand for special access, asking for “your expert help and guidance, to photograph game where it is least subject to outside intrusions; in fact as regards the filming in the Kruger Park itself, although I have known it well as a visitor ever since the days of Stevenson Hamilton, I would be grateful if the filming could be done with the best possible expert guidance that your staff could give us.”

The next section of the letter highlights the recurring problem of who controlled access to Kruger for making films. Van der Post at once apologises for institutional confusion but tries to pressure Knobel and assure him that he will be treated favourably:

I deeply regret that I have been unable to give you more notice. I had understood somehow that the Ministry of Information would have approached you direct in the matter several months ago, but somehow this was not done. Unfortunately, short as the time is, the dates I have indicated are the only possible ones if the film is to be made for showing on the BBC in 1974. If it is not shown then, there are changes of control pending in the organisation, which in any case plans its programs many years ahead, that will make a showing of such film impossible for years to come, if at all. Another reason why the dates are so important is that I got the BBC to agree to show the film next winter in what is the peak viewing hour on a Sunday evening just before Christmas between 7.30 and 8.30 pm.

Although, as I have said, the film itself will be a completely non-political film, I do believe its political consequences will be immense because it will put South Africa in its most creative light to a world which by now is conditioned to think of us entirely in terms of negation. I myself regard it as one of the most important things I will ever have done for South Africa, and I can pledge my word and reputation that I will allow

nothing in this film of which any of us need to be ashamed hereafter. I emphasise this because I know how shabbily you yourself have been treated on one occasion in what purported to be an objective wildlife film. Nothing of the sort will happy [sic] this time.

Van der Post then added further inducements, claiming that the film would be shown across the English-speaking world, translated into French and German, and saying that he had “suggested to the BBC that they approach the South African Broadcasting Corporation to see whether we cannot do one in Afrikaans as well for the day when we start television at home.” Van der Post thus presented himself as a South African, part of a “we” or “us” and home to which both he and Knobel belong, even though he had moved to live in England and was firmly part of the British establishment. The reminder about the gift of *Flamingo Feather* might also have been a way of reminding Knobel of his anti-communist concerns and sympathies.

On 18 January, an official in the South African Department of Information in Pretoria wrote in Afrikaans to Knobel. The letter, probably dictated by Rhodie, supported the Van der Post project, here presented as a film about the conservation of the white rhino to be shot in Hluhluwe, Umfolozi, Kalahari-Gemsbok and Kruger parks. The letter says the project enjoyed the support of the Department of Information and the Department of Foreign Affairs and that the Director of Information in London had advised Van der Post to get in touch with Knobel directly.

The letter, having shown some deference to Knobel, then re-applies the pressure: the project would be very desirable (“*baie verdienstelik*”), it would be shown widely, the South African Ambassador in London had given his whole-hearted support, and they would strongly appreciate it if Knobel would cooperate. They also believe it would forward further cooperation with the BBC.

On 1 February, Knobel responded to Van der Post with a copy to Tol Pienaar. The letter is at once an apparent concession to the pressure being put on him, but with a bureaucratic obstacle and not-so-gentle reminder to Van der Post that Knobel was suspicious of his political sympathies. The relevant section reads:

...I am now in a position to advise you that the National Parks Board will be prepared to assist you in making a film on the conservation work that is undertaken in the Republic of South Africa. Details of our co-operation could be made known later to you as we would first like to see a description of the film before committing ourselves completely. I hope you will understand, as I am sure you will, that we have to be very careful in giving our co-operation to any film being produced for overseas distribution.

I recall an occasion in 1954 or 1955, I am not quite sure of the date any more when I saw a television show by yourself on the Bushman and at that time certain statements were made with which I certainly do not agree and which put South Africa in a rather bad light. I quite accept the fact that your film is intended to show creative work that is being done in South Africa, but before giving our whole hearted support we would like to have some idea of the script.

I can assure you that any positive approach to anything done by South Africa shown over BBC will certainly receive our full blessing.

Knobel ended by assuring Van der Post that he remembered Van der Post's visit and the gift of a copy of his novel, *Flamingo Feather*. Knobel did not stipulate what elements of Van der Post's very influential six-part series *The Lost World of the Kalahari* he found "put South Africa in rather a bad light" but it was presumably the conclusion in which Van der Post condemned the social conditions of the San and their criminalisation for hunting, as well as the ways in which the earlier colonists had persecuted them.

There may have been other reasons for Knobel's cool reaction. The letter from the Department of Information suggested that the topic of the white rhino would mean a primary emphasis on the then Natal Parks Board and its success in saving the white rhino, with the Kruger something of an afterthought. Knobel may have felt that the Kruger deserved more attention but may also have been suspicious of the move to seek favour with the BBC and the British, traditionally hostile to Afrikaners.

This brief letter from Knobel provoked an impassioned four-page reply from Van der Post, dated 14 February.

Dear Mr Knobel,

Thank you for your letter which I received in Switzerland two days before my return to London, and forgive me for not answering it at once, because I felt the letter demanded more reflection on my part before doing so.

I note that you say that your board will cooperate with me in the making of the proposed film, but then goes on despite the encouragement and the clearance I have received from your Minister to make some considerable reservations.

In the first place, you say that this help is conditional on what amounts to be a script of the film of which you would have to approve. You say that you have to insist on this because nowadays one cannot be careful enough of television programmes – a general proposition which of course I do understand. You then add a sentence which by implication sets out why apparently you have to be particularly careful in my regard. The reason for this appears to be that you saw a film of mine, "The Lost World of the Kalahari", in 1956, in which you say I said things about South Africa with which you

could not agree and which apparently you thought unfair to our native country. I do not see, first of all, why a film on such an utterly different theme with such a different intent could be related to the film I am now proposing to make in South Africa, particularly when it is coupled with a pledge from me that it will be entirely creative and produce [sic] entirely to reflect credit on what I regard as one of the most positive contributions to the life of our time by South Africa.

Moreover, I do not understand how you could have found anything unfavourable to South Africa even in my Bushman film because it had nothing to do with South Africa at all, and South Africa entered into it only insofar as it was necessary to place the film in its historical context, and that only up to the early half of the 19th century. Present-day South Africa did not figure in it at all, except for one brief comparison and this was as follows: The film was completely devoted to the Bushmen of that part of the Kalahari Desert which was then situated in the British protectorate of Bechuanaland. It was indeed by implication a very severe criticism of the neglect by the British authorities of the Bushmen in their care and protection. It was taken as such in this country and there was a debate on it in Parliament, and as a result for the first time in the history of Bechuanaland, an officer was appointed charged with the special duty of protecting the interests of the Bushmen of Bechuanaland. I compared this belated action very unfavourably with the action of the South African Government in South West Africa, where I pointed out the Bushmen had enjoyed special protection for years. You will find confirmation of this fact in my book, "The Heart of the Hunter".

You will readily understand, therefore, the disappointment if not dismay that such a response on your part to the television venture which I had proposed to the South African government and which had already been approved by the relevant ministry.

Van der Post then complained about the request that he should provide a script in advance, saying that he had never had to do so before but also that wildlife filmmaking was too unpredictable. He then returned to suggest the spiritual or psychic importance of nature for modern industrial man:

My theme, as you know, is how the modern world if it is to survive, needs the return to nature more than nature needs us. It is concerned with a profound interdependence of man on the conservation of what is left of his natural environment. It is a problem which is of increasing concern to the young people and to the thoughtful older generation.

Few countries have shown a greater awareness and done more in this field than South Africa but because of the existing political prejudices in South Africa, no one is aware of South Africa's great contribution in this regard to the life of our time. My sole object is to make the world aware of this in the most creative way of which I am capable.

I do not think I really can add usefully to the statement. If my word to you that I will do nothing negative in the film is not good enough, as it has been good enough for the Ministry, I think I would really prefer not to make the film. Disappointed as I shall be, it will not be unaccompanied by some relief because I have more than enough to do in my life and less and less time to do it, and I undertook this task involuntarily because I wanted to leave my own visual testament of the beauty of the great natural Heritage we hold in trust in our native country. The loss of an unparalleled opportunity to put this testament before the world will not be mine but South Africa's.

If, however, you should feel, as I hope you will after reading this, that you could cooperate fully with me in the making of this film, I am perfectly prepared on my forthcoming visit to South Africa to call on you in Pretoria and answer in detail any further questions that you may have in mind, and work out a detailed scheme of timing and co-operation with you.

In the meantime I have advised the BBC that I have had to postpone my plans for making the film and that the earliest time I can start of the film would be towards the end of September or October of this year.

I am sending on a copy of a letter I wrote to Dr Carel de Wet in London setting out in greater detail my original intentions in regard to the film. I am also sending a copy of this letter to Dr Piet Koornhof who is a friend of mine and whom I have kept posted all along about the progress of this venture.

After closing salutations, Van der Post added a PS: "I could see you, should you wish it, in Pretoria some time between 27th March and 3rd April, or in Cape Town if that is more convenient. I will make my arrangements accordingly, but it would help me immensely to have your response either way, as soon as possible".

Van der Post's letter shows a significant shift of theme for the film – no longer about the white rhino but about a Jungian concern with man's need for nature. Van der Post also quite admirably stands his ground on the issue of apartheid racial superiority, suggesting that the "existing political prejudices in South Africa" (not against South Africa!) are a barrier to outsiders understanding what South Africa is doing for nature conservation. Van der Post thus tacitly includes Knobel in a group of enlightened Afrikaners who realise that any claims for superiority based simply on racial difference could not stand. As Hermann Giliomee points out, in 1974, Eschel Rhoodie was proposing to senior National Party figures that the government should dispense of all laws based simply on racial difference.¹⁸

18 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: biography of a people*, p.533-34.

Knobel was able to use the name-dropping at the end of Van der Post's letter to stall full approval in a deft bureaucratic riposte. In a letter of 18 February, Knobel seemed to give way by assuring Van der Post that "we will cooperate with you in trying to portray the work done in the field of nature conservation in South Africa". At the same time, he kept the question of script approval pending: "The question of the script will probably be cleared when I receive a copy of your letter to Dr Carel de Wet. I think that it is only reasonable that we should know in broad terms what line you will follow in trying to put across the message to the BBC audience of what South Africa is doing in the field of nature conservation". Van der Post, in turn, wrote on 22 February to set up a meeting with Knobel for 2 April in Pretoria, treating the matter of the script approval as something they would iron out then.

The next document in the archive reveals that pressure was being applied on Knobel by the liberal faction in the National Party government. In a confidential letter in Afrikaans dated 11 April, Eschel Rhoodie, Secretary of the Department of Information and later to be a central figure in the 'Muldergate' scandal that cost Mulder the presidency, wrote to Knobel. Rhoodie referred to a recent phone call about Van der Post, and to a letter of 5 February mentioning that the Director of Information in London and the South African Ambassador in London all supported the planned film about white rhinos. (Rhoodie may have been referring to the letter dated 18 January discussed above.) Then Rhoodie unsubtly increases the pressure by mentioning that he had discussed the matter with Dr Piet Koornhof, Minister of Sport, Recreation and Immigration and that Koornhof felt that Van der Post's attitude towards South Africa had changed so materially that he was convinced that Van der Post would treat South Africa well in the planned film. Here again, we see that Rhoodie was not going to say that Van der Post and Koornhof (and he) were now part of a new interpretation of white control but rather that Van der Post had changed from his earlier critical attitudes.

Rhoodie addressed Knobel and closed and signed the typed letter by hand, presumably as a way of making the letter more friendly and less bureaucratic. Knobel annotates the letter "telefonies beantwoord" (answered telephonically) and "Liasseer" (liaise), probably as a way of indicating that he would let his staff know about the project.

The next letter, dated 8 May, was from Van der Post to Knobel. In it Van der Post thanked Knobel for the meeting but referred to their political differences: "I hope that even if there are, as there might be, differences between us about our internal problems in South Africa, we both believe now as I do that these are honourable differences and that neither of us doubt the love of the other for our native country". He complimented Knobel for "the immense work you have done for keeping alive the interest of everyone in

the preservation of our natural life” and looked forward to seeing Knobel and making the film in the spring.

If Van der Post and Knobel stuck to their original meeting date, it seems that Knobel remained unconvinced and un-cooperative until Rhodie intervened by phoning him and writing the follow-up letter. Knobel, however, had a strong paper trail if the film turned out to be, in any way, an embarrassment to the South African government of the day.

A few letters followed in which Van der Post explained why he had to come in late September rather than earlier (letter of 9 June), though Knobel warned him that he would be clashing with school holidays (letter of 14 June). After that, most of the correspondence in the archive is between Van der Post and Tol Pienaar, head of the Kruger Park, with Knobel copied in.

In a letter of 1 July, 1974, Van der Post sets out his ideas for the film. By now, there was no mention whatsoever of the white rhino, and the emphasis had changed completely into something far more speculative about man’s relation to nature, reflecting Jungian concerns with the emptiness of modern life.

After some discussion of the dates and apologies for the timing of the visit, something Van der Post blamed on “various strikes and unpredictables in this strike-ridden and unpredictable society”, (another anti-trade union complaint suggesting he repudiated communist and socialist influences on society), he turned to the composition of the party which was to include for the first part the then Features Editor of the London *Sunday Times*. He then turned to a request for “a Land-Rover or whatever Park vehicle you think best for filming in places difficult to get at where we can observe the life of your park at its most intimate and undisturbed”. He continued:

At this stage, I think it is pointless to try and give you a detailed breakdown of what we propose doing because since our actors and principle [sic] artists will be the animals and the birds of your great Reserve we cannot prescribe their behaviour in advance and allow them places and roles in our scheme. But I thought that if I told you what the theme in my mind was that I would like to convey to the world you who know all this so much better than I would be able to advise me how best to realise it and contribute to the detail and the visual unfolding of the theme on the television screen.

I want to begin with what I call the abundance in the beginning that is, a picture of what Africa must have been like at the time when Virgil’s Aeneas [sic] hunted the same sort of animals just off shore on the Mediterranean littoral of the northern Africa of Dido’s Carthage, as our ancestors hunted down south when they landed at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. I want to impress right at the start how Africa is the greatest reservoir of natural life the world has ever seen with a variety of birds and beasts no other continent could ever equal.

I would then like to convey to viewers the kind of relationship that the human being living in the midst of this abundance had with his natural environment and how the birds and the animals were not merely food for his body but also nourishment for his mind and imagination and contributed to the growth of his spirit by reflecting, as it were in a magic mirror aspects of himself of which he was inadequately aware. I would do this of course by recalling many stories I know told to me by Bushman, Hottentots, Zulus, Masai and Baganda about animals, but I shall be most grateful here if you and your staff could add to what I already know all the many stories and legends I am certain they must know of the role of animals and birds in the African imagination and indeed recollections of what our own pioneering ancestors thought about them. For this picture of the abundance of plant and animal in the beginning I thought of several general shots like the lovely view from the top of the Oliphants gorge over the immensity of the Park, and as an example of what it must have felt like to be living in the bush, a view of the life of the park from where the Pafuri joins the Limpopo; indeed we might even start if you agree at the Pafuri, not because it will necessarily be the first in the order of the film as all that will be determined only when we can survey the whole mass of film material, but because it might be less affected by the school holidays and therefore a more convenient place from your point of view for us to start.

From there we would work our way slowly down south through the whole of the Park. Also we want to avoid what I think is the over-emphasis of all films about Africa on the horrific and the monumental in animal life. Of course we would love to do justice to the elephant and the lion but we would be just as interested in the non-aggressive and the small. For instance, I want to do the klipspringer in as much detail as possible because he is a kind of fairy prince in many of the stories I know. I would also love to have filmed the partnership between the honey-guide, the ratel and man but I imagine that unless we have the luck of the devil we would not have allowed ourselves time enough to do anything so ambitious but even just some filming of the ratel and the honey guide would at any rate enable one to pass on the story and its meaning to the imagination of man.

All these, of course, are the briefest of many illustrations but I hope enough to show you the spirit and the trend of the opening part of the film. The second part will start with the attack on the great African fortress of animal life, how it accelerated [sic] with the scramble for Africa which started a bare hundred years ago and accelerated to such an extent that at the end of the Anglo-Boer war even in South Africa many species were either extinct or fast disappearing. A great deal of this process of course will have to be illustrated documentarily and will be our special responsibility and concern, but again your own advice and that of your staff on how to set about it will be enormously appreciated.

Part three will be the realisation of how not only our own heritage but the whole natural world was imperilled: how South Africa started to fight back to preserve it and how it succeeded. Now today it is a model the rest of the world can envy. I want to end by

showing how in all conservation we are not just do-gooders out of compassion for poor defenceless flora and fauna but doing something vital for our own well-being and security and in this regard, my text is taken from the Dead Sea Scrolls, from a passage where the Disciples ask Christ how they will find the way to the Kingdom of Heaven and Christ answers them: "Follow the birds, the beasts and the fishes and they will lead you in."

I will try to show how places like the Kruger Park and the other reserves in South Africa are really great natural temples which if entered in a proper spirit of humility enable man to recover a reverence for all life including human life that he appears to have lost and that indeed, his lack of reverence for his natural environment and his greed for exploiting it purely for materialistic needs is one of the main causes of Barbarism, the brutality and the violence of our time.

I could say a great deal more, but I do not think a person of your imagination needs more from me but may I beg you to swill all this round in your imagination as I have asked all my friends to do and to help me with all that comes out of it as a result?

I look forward immensely to seeing you all and propose, if you agree, that we should start by coming to direct to you at Skukuza on 22nd September and plan a detailed schedule of work and filming there.

Incidentally, I cannot get the BBC to give me more than twenty-four days filming in the Kruger Park at the most whereas, as we both know, a whole year would barely be enough. Nonetheless I think I can get enough film material and above all, by what I propose saying give the world a glimpse of our country and an interpretation they have not had before.

All possible good wishes to you,
Laurens van der Post

6. VAN DER POST'S KRUGER AND REALITY

Van der Post's defence of the value of wilderness may be one of the most powerful claims made for the Kruger National Park, but in its didactic agenda of pointing to the shortcomings of modern industrial society and its inhabitants, it omitted much of the social history of the park and particularly of indigenous people moved from it. While the history of the thousands of local African inhabitants pushed from the park in its early years may have been regarded by Van der Post as uncontentious, he also explicitly mentioned filming where the Pafuri (now Luvuvhu) joins the Limpopo – and in 1969 the Makuleke people living in this area had been very contentiously forced to move from

here to land on the western border of the Kruger.¹⁹ Van der Post also implicitly takes the line, much favoured by the Vorster government, that Afrikaners are another people shaped by Africa rather than colonisers with allegiance to another country – here he implausibly argues that they are likely to have their own folklore. For the Kruger authorities with their new scientific managerial ethos, this must have seemed simply fanciful. Unsurprisingly, Pienaar never answered the letter and did not offer local folktales or legends to Van der Post.

The apartheid system whose strains were to be exposed by the Soweto uprising of 1976 barely figures in the discussion. As Miller points out, this may be because the situation at the beginning of 1974 changed dramatically during that year because of the fall of the Portuguese government and its African colonies so that Van der Post's assumption (shared by most international commentators) that the apartheid government was firmly in place was commonplace.²⁰

The last relevant letter was from Van der Post to Pienaar, dated 19 November 1974. From London, Van der Post thanked Pienaar and offered fulsome praise for "your wonderful body of men who work for you". For Van der Post, the film was to be "a wedge driven deep at last in the wall of world resistance against recognising what is good and positive and best in our beloved country and I hope that we will have driven this wedge so deep that the wall shall be bridged and that masses more can follow. With your help we can sow the seeds of a great new beginning of a world view of South Africa". He asked Pienaar to thank his staff, and Pienaar's handwritten annotation on the letter shows that copies of the letter were sent to Johan Kloppers and others.

Even here, Van der Post's letter may have carried some gentle sting – the unmistakable reference to Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* suggests that he did not shirk away from realising that Paton's critique was still valid and that he saw his task as reforming from without.

19 J Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park : a social and political history* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995); G Maluleke, "Rethinking protected area co-management in the Makuleke Region, South Africa" (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2018); C Steenkamp and J Uhr, *Makuleke Land Claim: Power Relations and Community-based Natural Resource Management* (London: IIED, 2000); P Harries, "A Forgotten Corner of the Transvaal": Reconstructing the History of a Relocated Community Through Oral Testimony and Song" (Johannesburg: History Workshop, University of Witwatersrand, 1984).

20 Miller, *An African folk : the apartheid regime and its search for survival*.

7. THE PRODUCER'S PERSPECTIVE AND THE FILMS THAT EMERGED

To make the film, Van der Post relied on a well-known BBC producer, Jonathan Stedall, with whom he had previously worked on a series of films on Carl Jung, one of the founding figures of psychoanalytical theory. Stedall's account of the making of the film suggests he and the BBC saw it very differently from either Van der Post's original outline to Knobel or, presumably, from what the South African Department of Information expected.²¹ He writes that "Our task was to make a film about the mythology of the bushmen..." for a long-running series *The World About Us*. As Van der Post had intimated in his letter to Pienaar, by the time he made the film he suggests he was more interested in folklore than scientific conservation or the politics of conservation. It may very well be that this had been his angle with the BBC from the outset.

Stedall notes about the stories that the "stories that most interested Laurens, however, were those about Mantis, "a mere stick insect" who presided over the bushmen's whole mythology". Stedall even illustrated his book with a still from the film of Van der Post with a praying mantis! [Figure 1]

Stedall's perspective further complicates the notion of this film, or wildlife films more generally, being seen as straightforward ideological products. As Bruno Latour and the proponents of Actor-Network theory suggest,²² any such product will be the result of interactions and compromises between many important actors: the BBC, the series editor, the producer, Van der Post as presenter, technical crews, conservation staff, and even the animals.

In the 48 minute television programme that emerged in 1975, Van der Post, as Stedall suggests, starts by recounting his own experience of healing through nature after World War II when he returned to the Northern Kruger Park but then concentrates almost entirely on San mythology and its implications.²³ The animals in the film are props to illustrate the San view of lions, hyenas, vultures or other animals.

The most surprising element of the film for somebody who only read the correspondence was that the Natal Parks Board figures prominently, with the white rhino elevated to a complex role as unicorn in the odd mix of San and Jungian mythologies the film espouses. The film never credits the Kruger

21 J Stedall, *Where on Earth is heaven?* (Stroud: Hawthorn, 2009).

22 B Latour, *Reassembling the social : an introduction to actor-network-theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

23 *The world about us*, "All Africa within us", aired 9 February 1975, on BBC; *The world about us*.

Park or Kalahari Gemsbok Parks directly, and the first acknowledgement at the end of the film was to the Natal Parks Board.



Laurens van der Post with a praying mantis

The take on the reasons for South African conservation came towards the end of the film and were decidedly Natal-centric and ahistorical, ignoring the Kruger Park's primary historical role in nature conservation in South Africa:

It means a great deal to me that the battle to conserve this abundance began in my native South Africa. It began with an attempt to preserve the white rhino which had once lived all over Africa....The battle was fought so well that it set an example which led to the creation of vast reservations where Black, Coloured, English and Afrikaner people are inspired by a common love of the animal and nature to work together in a relationship which could be a model for the future.

This was not the praise Van der Post had intimated he would offer in his letters to Knobel or, probably, in his discussions with Carel de Wet or Piet Koornhof, but it was a tribute of sorts. For somebody like Knobel, this would have seemed a betrayal as it boosted the kind of vision of Ian Player and the Wilderness Foundation in contrast to the National Parks Board.

The BBC originally presented the film in the context of the series "The world about us", but in 1983, they cut a new 24-minute version for the finale

of the first season of what was to become the long running series, “The Natural World”.²⁴ In this version, Van der Post is briskly introduced, but much of the personal reminiscence is cut out, and this version concentrates on San mythology. No references to rhinos or South African conservation survived.

8. CONCLUSION

Van der Post’s film, entitled “All Africa within us”, was eventually only shown on the BBC in 1975. It had little impact as a wildlife film or as a social analysis, and many summaries of Van der Post’s career make no mention of it at all. Nor did the film live up to the expectations that Van der Post and, presumably, the South African Department of Information held out for it in re-shaping British, European or North American views of South Africa.

Though the Soweto uprising of 1976 may have made Van der Post seem an out of date liberal figure, his career and his role as political advisor and advocate for wilderness were not yet over. He advised British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on Rhodesia, carried on playing an influential role in the Wilderness Foundation, and took Prince Charles on safari to Kenya in 1977. During the South African negotiations, he took the part of the Inkatha Freedom Party’s Mangosuthu Buthelezi in opposition to Mandela and the ANC.

For the National Parks and Kruger authorities in South Africa, the episode was part of a much longer and ongoing attempt to define their role and value as conservationists, scientists and social figures amidst increasing political tensions. The role of scientific managers that Carruthers describes found its fullest expression in the 26-part series, “Wildlife in Crisis”, produced by Norma Foster, also in this period, also supported by the Department of Information.

This analysis is made in the absence of a fuller history of issues such as the Kruger’s relationship with foreign wildlife filmmakers, the role of the Wilderness Foundation, the ways in which conservation efforts were used to boost South Africa’s image internationally, and how factions of the National Party worked to try to re-shape South Africa’s image abroad. But the complexities of one relatively minor production suggest that using conservation for propaganda is a highly complex issue: propaganda by whom and for what cause precisely?

For a supporter of Van der Post, his rationale may have been to drive Afrikaners and white South Africans more generally into a recognition of the “Africa within us”– a spiritual connection with the wilderness and the land

24 *The natural world*, season 1983, “All Africa within us”, 1983, on BBC.

that should link all those living here and overcome racial prejudices. For Stedall and the BBC, this was a continuation of Van der Post's role as sage commenting on what the "Bushmen" can tell us about the psychic problems of modern man. The National Parks scientists hoped for recognition of their internationally respected role as responsible managers of a complex eco-system. The Natal Parks Board people involved would have been pushing for a recognition of how the saving of the white rhino made them the central conservation heroes in the country. For Rhodie and Koornhof, this programme would have been a sign that Van der Post was moving to a sympathy with South Africa that would re-shape British public opinion. But a few months after the television programme was shown, Soweto June 1976 changed things utterly.

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