

*POACHING, DAMS AND MINING*

# Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve May Lose its World Heritage Status

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The Selous Game Reserve, with its 50,000 square kilometers, is Africa's largest contiguous, uninhabited nature reserve. Because of its universal importance, it was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982. After that a combination of poor management and poaching caused the elephant population to drop from over 100,000 to less than 30,000 (1989). The German-Tanzanian development project, the "Selous Conservation Program" (SCP) (1988 to 2003) was the turning point. Poaching came to a standstill, and the elephant population rose again to over 70,000 (2003). Several environmentally harmful large-scale projects were also blocked. Previously, the reservation was totally dependent on mini-allocations from the general budget, but the SCP implemented a scheme that retained fifty percent of the revenues. Ninety percent of those funds came from sustainable hunting. Hunting therefore ensured conservation.

After German support ceased in late 2005, the head of the Wildlife Authority immediately stopped the retention scheme. Instead of a budget of US three million annually, the reservation received only around half a million. The park administration collapsed, anti-poaching efforts were stopped, and the slaughter began again. From today's perspective, one can only conclude that this was a well-prepared and collusive action. According to official counts, more than 60,000 elephant were killed. Through Zanzibar and Pemba in Mozambique, the ivory was smuggled to Southeast Asia, and especially to China, by Chinese cartels in collaboration with bribed officials. More than US 100 million changed hands along the value chain, from the bush to the Asian markets. The business was worthwhile for all the parties involved.

Global seizures showed that the Selous-Niassa ecosystem was the poaching hot spot for savanna elephant for several years.

An aerial elephant census in 2013 found that only about 13,000 of the pachyderms had survived. UNESCO declared the reserve a World Heritage Site in Danger. In addition to the poaching, the reasons for this were planned mining developments and other large-scale projects. An area of three hundred square kilometers was cut out of the reserve in the Southwest for a Russian uranium mine. There, a particularly environmentally-harmful bleaching process will be utilized, where the uranium-containing rock is washed out of the soil with water. But due to the price decline of uranium on the world market, the mine has not yet started production. However, other mining concessions in the reserve have been awarded as well, and mining is in contravention of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, which Tanzania has signed.





**Top:** Smiling faces of some park staff after receiving a welcome donation of quality optics from Swarovski.

**Bottom:** In ten years poachers reduced the elephant population by eighty percent.



The results of the census in 2013 were a wake-up call. The Tanzanian government vowed to combat poaching. The retention scheme, which had been deliberately terminated in 2005 was reintroduced. Benson Kibonde, a long-time former reserve manager, who had successfully managed the reserve, was called out of retirement. An ad hoc program was initiated by the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) and supported by German development cooperation, and the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) provided some emergency financial assistance, about 400,000 Euros. The American government sent Marines to the reserve for training. Poaching decreased, and a census in 2015 showed that the elephant population was increasing again.

Since 2013, the German government, through the German Development Bank (KfW), has planned an aid program that would contribute eighteen million Euros, and that would essentially follow the guidelines of the earlier SCP. Currently, the project is just starting, and it is also being supported by the FZS, as well as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The FZS has been operating in the Selous for quite some time. In Germany there are politicians and top-level civil servants across party lines who support conservation efforts in Tanzania, especially in the Serengeti and Selous.

Currently, however, there is the impression that the Tanzanian government is renegeing on its long-standing commitment to conservation. Ownership is lost. Still, wildlife tourism remains one of the most important

industries and foreign exchange sources in the country. The delay in starting the German funded Selous Project is largely due to the Tanzanian side, and one can't help wondering whether the state authorities have any interest in rehabilitating the Selous.

President Magufuli, an increasingly autocratic ruling populist, is increasingly pursuing a policy reminiscent of Nyerere's African socialism. Like a bulldozer, he wants to ensure order in a land shaken by corruption scandals. Whether he will be successful remains doubtful. Wildlife tourism, to date the country's second most important economic sector, is losing political priority. Magufuli dreams of state-controlled industrialization. Under Nyerere the same political vision failed miserably. Without regard for environmental concerns, President Magufuli has



approved plans for a road to be built in the middle of the Selous (from Ilonga to Liwale), and for a dam on the Rufiji River on the northeastern edge of the Selous near Kidunda. This dam, which has been in the planning stages for twenty-five years, would have disastrous effects for the wildlife in the Northern Selous and in a wildlife management area north of the boundary. Mining is also to continue. However, the worst thing for the Selous is the decision to build a mega dam (2,100 megawatts) in the heart of the reserve at Stiegler's Gorge. Whether this makes any sense economically is unclear, as is who will pay for the project. In any case, the ecological consequences will be devastating. Below the dam is a vast wetland with swamps, lakes, creeks, a true paradise for the game and for the tourists who bring in the money. This area is the centre of photographic tourism in the Selous. The hunting blocks would mostly not be affected. Flow regulation could also endanger the livelihoods of up to 200,000 people settled along the Rufiji River between the reserve and the Indian Ocean. In the meantime, the first international tender has been issued for the construction work. Fifty construction companies are said to have put in bids.

Due to this development, the German aid program has found itself in a difficult situation. A prerequisite for the German project is that the Selous retains its World Heritage status. This was an explicit condition for the funding, and intended to prevent German taxpayers from rehabilitating the reserve if

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More important than the number of elephants is the protection of suitable habitat for the wild animals. With good management and protection the number of elephants can be doubled in ten to fifteen years.



at the same time its universal value was being destroyed through dubious large scale projects. It is pretty clear, however, that UNESCO will withdraw the World Heritage status from the reserve if the dam at Stiegler's is built. By then, at the latest, Germany must show its true colors. Before this happens, several years will pass and a large portion of the promised millions will be spent.

The word from Tanzania is that government envoys are gathering information about how to pull out of the World Heritage Convention. In this way, the humiliating withdrawal of the World Heritage status could be bypassed, and Tanzania would be in the driver's seat. In any case, the government is trying to paint the process as a new form of conflict between the poor South and the rich North: Tanzania strives to industrialize, while the industrialized countries want to preserve national parks and wild animals, and thereby prevent development. Therefore, signature campaigns to save the Selous, like those just completed by the WWF, are most likely counterproductive. Such actions however are really more for publicity and for raising funds than anything else.

Recently, Tanzania found a particularly subtle way to humiliate Germany. In the middle of June the aid project for the Selous was officially opened. A special train with officials, diplomats, journalists, development aid workers, and other VIPs traveled to Matambwe, the

headquarters of the Selous. At this opening the outgoing German ambassador stressed how important it was to preserve the Selous for the common heritage of humanity, and noted that major infrastructure development projects would threaten this treasure. The Tanzanian Minister of the Environment also voiced friendly words, and thanked the Germans for their eighteen million Euros. On the sidelines however, he gave a press conference for Tanzanian journalists and told them that the government had decided to go ahead and build the dam, irrespective of environmental concerns. Also, weeks before, the Tanzanian president had signed an agreement with the Ethiopian president, where Ethiopia agreed to support Tanzania with planning for the dam. The day after the opening, the daily newspapers lauded Germany's help in saving the Selous, and announced simultaneously that the dam would be built. An excellent example of adding insult to injury.

Ironically, in line with the planned destruction of the Northern sector of the Selous, the World Bank has granted Tanzania a credit of US 150 million to boost tourism in the so-called "Southern Circuit". A suitable advertisement could be: "Come to Tanzania, visit the Selous and see for yourself how the government is destroying a World Heritage Site."

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