

Introduction to Selous Book

There is a game reserve in southern Tanzania, which is larger than Switzerland or Denmark thus making it not only the largest protected wildlife area in Africa but in the world. There are other large national parks, but some have people living within, while others are deserts with little wildlife. The game reserve we talk about has no people inside its boundaries, but it contains some of the biggest wildlife concentrations on the continent, including 70,000 elephants, over 120,000 buffaloes, more than half a million antelopes and a couple of thousand large carnivores all roaming free in its forests, riverine thickets, steppes and mountain ranges. Its origins date back to the German colonial times of 1896 making it Africa's oldest protected area.

This place is called "Selous" after the great hunter, adventurer and author Frederick Courteney Selous, who was killed in action there in the First World War while fighting the German troops of General von Lettow-Vorbeck.

Until recently this place was virtually unknown. As late as 1990 no more than a thousand visitors – tourists and sport hunters – visited the Reserve annually. Despite the recent increase in tourism the Selous is still a vast unspoilt wilderness, one of the few remaining on the continent. It is Africa as God created it. It has more wildlife now than it contained in the 19th century when people still lived there. Tourism touches certain areas only, and the minibus remains unknown. Human footprints are not to be found in most places except for those of the occasional game scout, passing through on patrol.

Despite all these superlatives, only two books have been written about the Reserve – Secret Eden and Sand Rivers, both now out of print for many years. Understandably their authors were able to spend only short periods in the area. One of them, Eric Robins, wrote in an author's note: "There is a small and select club – let's call it 'The Company of the Selous' – to which this author and the rest of the world have no qualifications for membership."

Well, our book is by the 'Company of the Selous'. 13 of its 20 authors have spent a considerable part of their lives inside the Selous as wardens, managers, advisors, scientists, explorers, hunters and pilots. In total they share over a century of work in the Reserve with Brian Nicholson's 24 years and Benson Kibonde's 15 years being the most conspicuous. They also share the belief that the Selous is not only the largest and oldest protected area in Africa, but also one of the finest in the world.

Whoever has traversed this wilderness on lengthy foot patrols, passing through vast forests, dense thickets and groundless swamps and across sand rivers, watching herds of elephants and buffaloes and innumerable antelopes and birds, becomes addicted. The 'Company of the Selous' is therefore a group of Selous addicts. For all of us our work in the "Shamba la Bibi", as it is locally called, was a particularly important time and, for some, the very best time of our lives. We hope that with this book our feelings and sentiments about the Wild Heart of Africa can be shared with the reader. And we equally hope that this book will make the public aware of how important it is to conserve this World Heritage Site.

Here comes the story of the Selous – from the inside!