

KILLING THE KILLING FIELDS OF LOLIONDO

By Ted Botha

In a corner of Africa, hunters from the Middle East run amok with submachine guns, killing and maiming animals, then spirit away their orphaned infants to keep them as pets. Even worse than this massacre is that no one wants to know about it

I first heard about the killing fields of Loliondo several years ago. It struck me at the time that it was a sensational story. Arabs shooting up animals in Africa with AK47s, stealing leopard and lion and cheetah cubs to take back to Dubai and Damascus with them, building an airfield on the edge of the Serengeti so that cargo planes could haul away the booty they weren't meant to be taking out in the first place, setting up cameras and armed patrols to keep the Maasai away from tribal lands they'd been traversing for centuries, and even bribing them to convert to Islam.

The story sounded too good to be true. Nice guys, bad guys, and innocent animals caught in between. It wasn't a new story, at least not in Africa. But editors in New York didn't seem to know about it. Over the next few years I discovered that they didn't want to know about it either. Some of them thought it was a worthy story. (*Wow, they gasped, is that really true? Animals? AKs? Arabs? Corruption? Now that's a story someone should write about. Fascinating, really fascinating.*) But none of them took it - and for various reasons.

"It's too far away."

"People don't know/care about Africa."

"We have too many stories about Africa already."

"We know hunting is cruel, but what's the new angle?"

"Isn't AIDS bad enough? Do you really want to tell another tragic story about a devastated continent?"

After 9/11, there were other concerns. Mostly they had to do with the fact that the story implicated Arabs. The media suddenly seemed to be consumed by an anti-anti-Arab sensitivity, so that any story about Arabs who were doing something bad that didn't have to do the World Trade Center attacks or Al Qaeda was just in poor taste. Couldn't we journalists pick on someone else, please?

The upshot was this: I had a sensational story, but no one wanted it. Which turned this into a story about two hunts, the first being the cruel, devastating kind for animals in Africa, the second being the cruel, frustrating kind for a publisher in America.

The first hunt begins in Tanzania in 1992, when an anomalous-sounding outfit called the Ortello Business Company, based in the United Arab Emirates and owned by its deputy minister of defense, Brigadier Mohamed Abdul Rahim Al Ali, was sold a 20-year concession to Loliondo by the then president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi.

At the time Brigadier Ali made all kinds of eco-friendly (and very friendly-sounding) promises - he would protect and conserve the area, pay local communities a percentage of any income earned off of it, create

employment, build schools, lay on water, and so forth - and he boasted that the deal would "demonstrate to all [the world presumably] the seriousness that the Arab world is giving to wildlife conservation..."

Ali, or 'the brigadier,' as he is referred to locally, couldn't have been given a more ideal place to prove his good faith. The 1,540-square-mile concession of Loliondo is a very important piece of property, especially in ecological terms. It lies adjacent to the Serengeti National Park, the Ngorongoro highlands, and the Maasai Mara, putting it smack in the path of hundreds of thousands of wildebeest and zebra during their annual migration. If when Westerners think of Africa, they think of wide open plains teeming with animals, then Loliondo is at the very heart of it.

Loliondo is also located on the border of Kenya, which would make it easy for any unauthorized person - or military aircraft, given that the brigadier has constructed a 1.6-mile airstrip on the property - to enter or leave the country. This fact alone, an unnecessary military airstrip in Africa built and owned by a defense minister from the Middle East, should have raised a few eyebrows, especially after the terrorist attacks pre-9/11 in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi and post-9/11 on a Mombasa hotel. But it didn't.

In 1959, when Tanzania was still called Tanganyika, Loliondo was proclaimed a conservation area. For thirty years, after independence from Britain and then during *ujamaa*, the post-liberation leader Julius Nyerere's unsuccessful form of socialism, Loliondo's status remained unchanged. Even though plenty of animal-killing went on in the '70s and '80s, most of it was by poachers. They wiped out hundreds of thousands of elephants and rhino for ivory and rhino horn until an international ban on the sale of both helped to turn the tide.

But then, while no one was looking, something strange happened. Illegal hunters were replaced by the legal kind, trophy or sport hunters. In the 1990s, when Tanzania was ditching *ujamaa* for a market-oriented economy, hunting was suddenly seen as a way of earning money, and Loliondo was declared a 'hunting block.'

Tanzania sells hunting blocks to anyone who can afford them, which usually means foreigners, who then bring friends/family/clients to hunt there. (In the case of Loliondo, these visitors have included King Abdullah II of Jordan.) In 1990 there were only 47 blocks in the country, but by 2000 that number had tripled, to 140. At present about twenty percent of the country is designated for hunting.

All across Africa, the same thing is happening - hunting is catching on like wildfire - and it's not hard to see why. Money. Animals are the crude oil of the savanna. Tourists who point Winchesters, it has been calculated, spend at least ten times as much as tourists who point Nikons. In South Africa, for instance, an ordinary lion costs \$10,000 to kill, a black-maned one \$25,000, and an extremely rare white one, over \$150,000. Last year a Norwegian hunter was prepared to pay \$60,000 to shoot a tame black rhino until, in a much-publicized case that even involved the movie actress Charlize Theron (who paid for the rhino's accommodations until its fate was decided), the Supreme Court wouldn't let the hunt go ahead.

Besides each animal he kills, a hunter has to pay to camp, to eat, to employ trackers, and so forth, which can work out to more than \$1,000 a day. In a country with a robust economy, such as South Africa, those figures are tempting. In countries in the midst of famine and financial ruin (Zimbabwe) or overcoming years of ruinous socialist policies (Zambia and Tanzania), they are just plain irresistible.

Not that the local people who should benefit from that money ever see it. In Botswana, it was estimated by Dereck Joubert, who writes for *National Geographic* and has spent many years tracking lion and other animals to write books like *Hunting with the Moon*, locals earned 2 pula (a few cents) per animal shot. The bulk of the money often goes to the outfitters, who are based on other continents, in places like Texas, Germany and the Middle East.

Outfitters, as well as some pro-hunting conservationists, argue that hunting has an important role to play in conservation. It is a way of controlling animal numbers while earning money for Africa. They would

probably also argue that most hunters respect the Four Rules of Hunting, namely (1) No drugging or baiting of animals, (2) No hunting from vehicles, (3) No hunting at night using high-powered lights to blind your prey, and (4) No use of semiautomatic weapons.

In the United States and Europe, perhaps that happens. Not in Africa.

Joubert, needless to say, is vehemently against trophy hunting. He believes it erodes the community and the economy. Hunting safaris are seasonal, use very basic camps, and the staff are seldom trained in any job that can keep them employed during the non-hunting months. Photographic safaris, meanwhile, are year-round and are based out of well-established camps, such as Governor's in Kenya or Richard Branson's Ulusaba in South Africa; and the staff are trained in everything from cooking to management.

And then, of course, there's the diminishing gene pool to think about. Because the biggest and best animals are the most highly sought-after by hunters, they are systematically being killed off. Male lions are getting smaller and elephant tusks punier. Hunters shoot an animal once, then it's gone forever; tourists with cameras shoot the same animal thousands of times and it is still there. You do the math.

The worst offender on the continent is, ironically, also the most conservation-savvy: South Africa. During the '70s and '80s, when poaching was rife in the rest of Africa, there was hardly any in South Africa, which was so successful in protecting animals that the Kruger National Park landed up with too many elephants and the KwaZulu-Natal Parks Board singlehandedly saved the black rhino from extinction.

Animals did so well, in fact, that it didn't take long for the hunters to realize that South Africa had what they wanted - in abundance. Now, commercial hunting is an industry. Over \$1.5 billion is invested in 25 million acres of game farms, breeding centers and hunting ranches. Foreign hunters, largely from Europe, the Middle East and the United States, spend \$100 million a year to kill as many as 32,000 animals. (A 28-year-old Alabaman hunter who was recently quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* said he had killed 17 animals in 16 days.)

To ensure a regular supply of the most desirable animals - the Big Five (lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo, and even the still-endangered black rhino), lechwe, African wild dog, cheetah, and, more recently, foreign species like the Bengal tiger - they are not only being bred in captivity, in Africa's version of puppy mills, but also brought in from neighboring countries, and even stolen from game parks.

Thankfully, South Africa's problems are being brought to light by a zealous local media, as well as by television programs such as Britain's *Cook's Report*, which several years ago exposed the controversial activity of canned hunting, or shooting a lion that is caged and often drugged. (Despite the program, though, canned hunting still goes on.)

But in Tanzania, Loliondo has always been shrouded in secrecy. From the time it was sold to OBC, there were questions. The price the Arabs paid was never made public; the Maasai, whose cattle have been allowed to roam across boundaries and terrain like Loliondo for centuries, were never consulted; and the way the application was rushed through led to rumors of presidential favors and government corruption. (This is quite possible, seeing Tanzania came 82 nd out of 91 countries covered in Transparency International's 2001 Corruption Perceptions Index.)

My search for more information about Loliondo began in Arusha, a town near Mt. Kilimanjaro that is known, if at all, for being the seat of the International War Crimes Tribunal on Rwanda. It is also a major crossroads for hunters - the people who organize hunts, the foreigners who come to hunt, and the government officials who provide the licenses that are needed to hunt.

When none of the outfitters agreed to talk to me (about Loliondo or, for that matter, anything else), I contacted their colleagues farther afield, in the hunting blocks to the south, in Ruaha and Selous. When

they also refused to talk, I contacted outfitters in Zimbabwe and Zambia, but the outcome was always the same - zip. It was either because I told them I was a journalist (and all hunters seem to be convinced that no journalist has a good word to say about them) or because they knew that there was, in fact, something fishy going on in Loliondo.

If solidarity didn't keep people quiet, then fear did. In New York, I met a woman who worked for a company that owns a luxury safari camp in the Serengeti, not far from Loliondo. Its clients were not hunters, though, but photographic tourists. She told me that the manager of the camp knew what the Arabs in Loliondo were up to, and he didn't like it. Besides being cruel, it was very bad for his business. He would be out on his Landrover with a group of Americans and Brits pointing binoculars when they came across a Jeep-load of Arabs pointing submachine guns. Some of his guests would be so upset by this that they caught the first available flight home.

The manager regularly heard automatic gunfire from camp - again, I had to go on what his colleague told me - and he would find animal carcasses in the veldt, killed by gunfire, and most of the time it was quite pointless. Two wildebeest, for example, were positioned head-to-head, shot while they sparred playfully with each other. The shooters never even bothered to take the skins or the horns as trophies; they simply shot the animals for the sake of shooting. Nor were the hunters sticking to the boundaries of Loliondo, but regularly penetrated into the Serengeti, which is a protected area, and across the border into Kenya's Maasai Mara, which is not only a protected area but is also in a country that banned commercial hunting twenty-five years ago.

I wanted to get hold of the camp manager, but the owners asked me not to. They were worried about the consequences - and understandably so. They had invested heavily in Tanzania, and they feared the government would close them down if they talked about what was going on. I couldn't even get employees who had left the company to discuss the Arabs. In fact, every lead I got went nowhere, and I was convinced that the whole of East Africa knew about Loliondo but no one wanted to be the first to spill the beans.

Just as I was coming to a dead end, however, I heard about a man named Meitamei Dapash ... and the floodgates suddenly opened.

Meitamei works out of a small office in Washington, D.C., the sole representative of the Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition, or MERC. In existence since 1999, MERC is supported by, among others, the Humane Society of the United States and the Animal Legal Defense Fund.

Meitamei not only knew about Loliondo and wanted to talk about it, but he had recently returned from a trip to the area. He and six colleagues had interviewed several hundred Maasai villagers and herdsman, as well as local church personnel, employees of nongovernmental organizations, park officials, tour operators, and former and present OBC employees. When I questioned him, he shot off information like one of the machine guns he was trying to silence, confirming all the rumors I'd heard until now.

The Arabs were breaking every rule there was to break. According to what MERC heard, they were using semi-automatic weapons, hunting with lights at night, luring animals with artificially created salt-licks and waterholes, shooting animals from vehicles, and shooting or capturing the young and old, the male and female, the lactating and pregnant. (Tanzania, while it allows hunting, forbids the use of bait, poisoned bait, poisoned weapons, stakes, pitfalls, nets, snares, hides, fences or enclosures, artificial light or flare, automatic weapons or self-loading rifles, or hunting "within 500 meters of any permanent water, pool, waterhole or salt-lick, and within a kilometer of a national park or other protected area, and hunting at night.")

The accusations went on. Animals the Arabs captured that were considered unhealthy were shot, and their carcasses were then sold to non-Maasai communities (the Maasai do not eat wild game), further encouraging poaching and an illegal market for bush meat. Mysterious veldt fires would occur exactly when and where they were needed for the hunters to trap animals and stop them from crossing the border to

safety, in Kenya or the Serengeti. As many as 100 animals were flown out of the country each week; and in the last six months of 2000, according to OBC workers, those exports included some 70 lion, 28 cheetah and 17 leopard. Larger animals, such as eland, buffalo, giraffe, zebra and waterbuck, were held in enclosures until they could be flown out.

The MERC representatives had to go on oral evidence for the most part, seeing they couldn't get access to Loliondo and at one point were forcibly removed from the property. While driving around the area, however, they did find countless empty bullet shells as well as many wounded animals. During their investigation, in August 2001, they also saw the ripple effect of a high-profile hunt that included King Abdullah II of Jordan. The entourage was accompanied by a helicopter and two small planes, which were used not only to patrol the area but also to herd wildebeest and other large groups of animals toward the foot of the hills, where they would be trapped and more easy to shoot.

"For two days, MERC heard gunshots almost continuously," Meitamei wrote in the report several months later. "It is hard to estimate the number of animals killed but Maasai believe that at least sixty animals were killed or wounded in the two-day expedition. Over the following month, the Maasai encountered many wounded animals, particularly buffalo, zebra and wildebeest. Sometimes they speared them to relieve them of their suffering."

So many animals were being killed that workers at Loliondo had started talking about 'the killing fields of Loliondo.'

The OBC was also destroying the Maasai way of life. It declared "grazing restrictions," stopping locals from traversing land they had used for centuries, and started arresting and beating people who carried on doing it. Hunters went dangerously close to Maasai homesteads, threatening the security of their children and livestock. Village elders and park rangers were bribed to encourage locals to favor the OBC, and Maasai were being paid 30,000 Tanzanian shillings each (up to \$40) to convert to Islam.

"The act of buying people into a faith defies the teachings of any religion and is a deliberate act to destroy the Maasai people," a local church leader said.

At the 1.6-mile airstrip, meanwhile, military aircraft were landing up to twice a week, loaded with four-wheel-drives, weapons and communication gear - as well as hunters accompanied by young Pakistani and Filipino women - and then flew out with a variety of live animals and bush meat. They were not subject to inspections in either direction.

Security around the property was tight, and it was clear that the agreement between the Tanzanian authorities and the UAE went much further than just a lease allowing the Arabs to hunt. A joint team of the country's paramilitary wing, the Full Force Unit, and members of the UAE army patrolled the property, and there was always a strong police presence. No one could prove that it was a kind of payment, but it was well known that the UAE royal family had donated passenger aircraft to the Tanzanian army and a number of vehicles to its wildlife division.

During the interviews, Meitamei said, it was obvious that everyone - from Maasai herdsman to park official to businessman - was intimidated by the OBC, and feared some kind of retribution if they talked.

"The Maa word for 'the Arab,' Olarrabui, is often used to refer to Brigadier Al Ali, and, by extension, the OBC," Meitamei said. "The word has become synonymous with power, authority, brutality, fear, and entities larger than life. It's amazing no one talks about this. Everyone is too scared. The Arabs are a mafia."

If you looked closely enough, though, you could see a groundswell of resistance to OBC starting. *The East African* newspaper in Kenya had carried several articles about their country's wildlife and economy being

seriously threatened by outsiders. (Photographic tourism is Kenya's largest earner of foreign exchange.) A journalist from Associated Press, Chris Tomlinson, was sending the occasional story to an even broader audience abroad, although no one seemed to be picking up on it.

At the same time, more and more Maasai were growing vocal about cases of intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, even torture by OBC officials and security forces. Thirteen of their elders trekked across the country to the capital, Dar es Salaam, to press the government to take action against the OBC.

"We cannot just sit and watch the Arabs take our land," a spokesman for the elders, Sandet ole Reya, was quoted as saying. He finished with a very serious warning: "If necessary, we will wipe out all animals in the area to keep the Arabs out of our land."

A war of words began between the Maasai and the government, with people suggesting that ex-president Mwinyi and other Tanzanian officials were part owners of Loliondo, and that's why nothing was being done about it. Government officials accused the Maasai of trying to make political mischief, a suggestion that was ridiculed by the Tanzanian association of environmental journalists, JET, whose chairman, Balinangwe Mwambungu, said the Maasai were "not affiliated to any political party and, therefore, had no reason to lie to the world."

When questioned by *The East African* about all the allegations, the OBC managing director, Juma Akida Zodikheri, denied them, and said animal numbers in Loliondo had actually *increased* under the OBC's guardianship.

All of this information, you understand, was my own bait, the lure, the stuff a freelancer uses to entice a publication to commit itself to a story. This was the ammunition in *my* hunt. I believed I now had enough evidence to prove the story was valid, so I sent out a proposal. Hopefully that would entice a publication to send me to Loliondo to investigate more thoroughly. I was all fired up, even though Meitamei warned me that it wouldn't be an easy story.

"People are scared," he said. "That's why they don't talk. It's dangerous."

I singled out publications that I thought were interested in issue-driven articles and had at least once in their lifetime carried a story on Africa, and I wrote to them. *Harper's* never replied. Ditto the *Atlantic Monthly*. *Outside* said they had a backlog of "African travel stories (sic)." *Mother Jones* made nice noises, but honestly they had too much other stuff; and besides, they were only a bi-monthly. The *New York Times Magazine* was already doing a piece about the excesses of the wealthy class in Dubai, and hunting in Loliondo was just too much of an overlap. But thanks anyway. Some editors said it was the perfect story for the *New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair* - had I tried them? - which was a snub and a compliment at the same time.

Finally, an editor at *National Geographic Adventure* got enthusiastic about the idea, although several months passed before his editor-in-chief even considered it. I finally went in for a meeting. The editor-in-chief sat in a corner and looked disinterested. He could see a problem: photographs. How were they to get images of secretive Arabs shooting at herds of animals with AK47s when there were armed patrols and security cameras everywhere? And then there was that animal-hunting 'thing.' How did they photograph the wholesale slaughter of animals for a magazine that was, despite its name, a glossy?

They came up with a solution. At around the same time, a photographer had approached *NGA* with a proposal about a big-game hunter from Europe who took guests to shoot in Africa. Perhaps, said the *NGA* editor, I could write THAT story. At first I wondered what the subjects had in common other than hunting, although I had to admit that the pictures would be a lot easier to get (I could already see the glossy shots of khaki-clad hunters with big guns at white-clothed tables under a baobab next to their just-killed buffalo).

It was a cop-out, but I said I would be prepared to do it. Somewhere in the story, I believed, I would be able to slip in a few paragraphs about Loliondo - I would tell the world about it that way. I was running out of magazine options, and I was losing hope that Loliondo would get any coverage at all.

Then, out of the blue, an editor at *Condè* expressed an interest in the story. (*Condè*? Yes, apparently this would be one of their occasional forays into 'relevant journalism'). I didn't have much confidence that they would take the story in the end, although it was a nice gesture on their part. Then something happened that made them nix it: 9/11.

All of a sudden, no one wanted Loliondo. *NGA*, who had in the meantime discarded the big-hunter idea, didn't return my calls. *CNT* shelved not only Loliondo idea but also every story that had a Muslim anywhere in the neighborhood. It was as if the Muslim world would disappear if the editors ignored it hard enough. All they wanted were stories about America, America and more America.

Except, that is, *National Geographic*. An editor there loved the Loliondo idea. He took my proposal and sent it to *NG*'s sausage machine of researchers and checkers, who basically compile their own story before they let the journalist do his version. The editor-in-chief, meanwhile, wanted to know why the story had never been covered before. Ten years and no one had written about it?

As part of *NG*'s research (to ensure that I hadn't made up this fabulous story perhaps?), they contacted two of the biggest names in conservation, the renowned Kenyan anthropologist Richard Leakey and the chimp expert Jane Goodall. Both of them said to do the story on Loliondo. After that, I was sure the story was a sure thing.

But then *NG* ran into a familiar problem. Photographs. Furthermore, they were worried about doing a story that might offend other countries neighboring the UAE, and possibly sabotage future stories they might have in the Middle East. Then, to cap it all, the magazine went through a change of editorial staff. The proposal gradually lost momentum, and even though the editor I was working with wanted it, he couldn't get anyone to back him. Loliondo sat in limbo.

I kept wondering if I shouldn't just pay my own way to fly to Arusha, go to local bars, talk to hunters, and stake out Loliondo for several weeks. Wasn't that how great stories were written - you just went off on a whim? Trouble is, because of the way freelancing works (you investigate the hell out of the story before you even get to it), I had already tested the waters and there seemed to be no interest in the story. What was the point of throwing away money on a dead duck - not to mention more time? It had at this stage been two years since I'd first heard about Loliondo.

In May 2002, *MERC* brought out a report titled *The Killing Fields of Loliondo*. It was the last and best chance the story had of attracting some genuine interest in the media.

Dedicated to 'present and future generations of the Maasai people, faithful stewards of nature and wildlife in East Africa,' the report put in black and white all the things Meitamei had told me, as well as numerous things I would've learnt if I'd gone to Tanzania to investigate the story.

Such as: One, the battle for Loliondo is also a battle for the future of wildlife in East Africa, pitting the Tanzanian government and hunters (not only the Arabs, but ALL commercial hunters) against the Maasai and eco-tourists.

Two, the Maasai have been conservationists since time immemorial. They do not believe in commercial hunting, for it leads to greed, over-exploitation of wildlife resources, and often irreversible damage to delicate ecosystems. What they do believe is that today's generation holds all natural resources in trust for future generations. Over the centuries they have developed a very special relationship with wild animals, so that they and their cattle can share water and grass with them.

Three, it is largely thanks to the Maasai way of life - pastoral and pacifist - that the Kenya/Tanzania cross-border region continues to have such an abundance of wild animals, not only helping to maintain one of the most important ecosystems in Africa, but also guaranteeing a future for the region's strongest industry, tourism.

All this, however, was being jeopardized by commercial hunting. The Arabs were an extreme example of what was happening across the whole of Tanzania, where hunters were being allowed to break the law with impunity. They were bribing wildlife officials to let them enter protected areas, give them blank hunting certificates to shoot as many animals of whatever kind they liked, and turn a blind eye to these actions.

"Here in Tanzania we can kill what we want because money speaks," a Danish hunter told MERC. "You find the park rangers are now the guides for hunting expeditions both inside and outside the park."

Not all rangers are like that, though, and one of them beseeched MERC to tell the world the story of Loliondo.

"You must raise this concern because there is serious wildlife destruction going on here. Perhaps you can implore international conservation regimes to carry out thorough investigations to discover the truth."

An elder at a Maasai village, meanwhile, had already given up hope. "The government and, indeed, justice are not on our side. We have been forced to accept things as they are because we have no power to stand up against this Arab."

I went back to the magazines armed with my new ammunition. I was sure the report from MERC would make a difference to them. But it didn't. Not for the first time, I felt as though I had let Meitamei down. I had questioned him and other people for several years, convinced that their story was newsworthy, but my profession didn't seem to think so. I had to tell him something every freelancer hates to do with a story he believes in: I was giving up on their story. The Arab hunting in Loliondo would carry on, but my hunt for a place to expose it was over.

Ted Botha is a freelance journalist based in New York.
www.tedbotha.com

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I wrote the above story in order to give closure to all the research I'd done on Loliondo as much as to vent my frustrations with freelancing. Offbeat though the article is, I submitted it to publications I thought would be sympathetic to its sentiments - *The Village Voice*, *Utne Reader*, *The Columbia Journalism Review*, and *salon.com*. Two of them sent curt replies, and the other two didn't even bother with that.