

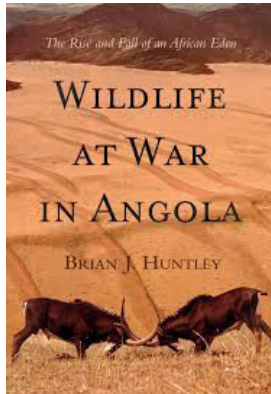


An environmental history of Angola

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Wildlife at war in Angola: The rise and fall of an African Eden

BOOK COVER:



AUTHOR:

Brian J. Huntley

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REVIEWER:

Brian W. van Wilgen

AFFILIATION:

Centre for Invasion Biology,
Department of Botany and
Zoology, Stellenbosch University,
Stellenbosch, South Africa

EMAIL:

bvanwilgen@sun.ac.za

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In stark contrast to other countries in the southern third of Africa, very little is known about the ecosystems, vegetation and wildlife of Angola. In almost 500 years of colonial rule, the nation of Portugal profited from the extraction from Angola of resources in the form of slaves, ivory, timber, diamonds and oil, but re-invested very little into development, or into the conservation of the country's considerable wealth and diversity of landscapes and wildlife. The remarkably small settler community was dominated by poor and relatively uneducated Portuguese citizens, including a large proportion of exiled criminals. However, in the early 1970s, moves were afoot to strengthen the Angolan national park system, and to place the management of parks on a sound scientific footing. It was a brief but promising period in Angola's conservation history – one in which this book's author, Brian Huntley, played an important role.

Huntley was appointed in 1971 as a scientific advisor to the colonial government, and was broadly tasked with documenting the status of the existing protected area network, and making proposals for their management and, where necessary, expansion. Unfortunately, the events that followed Angola's independence in 1975 (including open warfare between rival liberation movements, and invasion of Angola by the South African Defence Force) forced Huntley to leave. However, he never lost interest in Angola, and the collapse of South Africa's apartheid policies in 1990 made it possible for him to re-establish contact with Angolan colleagues and to regularly follow up on initiatives related to conservation and ecosystem management in Angola over the next 25 years. This book provides a very personal, first-hand account of the history and challenges facing wildlife and environmental conservation in Angola – a topic that has not been addressed adequately before, and one which Huntley is eminently qualified to write.

Angola has a rather depressing history, with its 500-year colonial past being marked by four phases: commencing with a slave state, followed by a penal colony, an era of forced labour, and a failed programme of agricultural settlement. In all of this, there was one brief window of relative peace in the early 1970s, which was characterised by some optimism regarding the development, conservation and management of a protected area network in Angola. This network included a wide range of spectacularly beautiful landscapes that abounded with wild animals, including eland, oryx, springbuck, zebra, buffalo, lechwe, roan, bushbuck, reedbuck, elephant and rhino. Pride of place went to the giant sable antelope, which remains the country's national symbol; this sub-species inhabited the miombo woodlands of central Angola, and was a much sought-after prize by trophy hunters over many decades. Readers are provided with a background to the national parks, the ecology of different vegetation types and their importance as habitats for the large fauna. A chapter is devoted to the discovery and ecology of the desert plant *Welwitschia mirabilis*, a 'living fossil' gymnosperm that symbolises the Namib Desert. However, the brief period of environmental progress was halted by the escalation in 1975 of what turned out to be a 41-year-long war, which brought terrible misery to most Angolans, and saw the almost total destruction of the nation's forests and wildlife.

The book takes the reader through the effects of war, with a special focus on the environmental consequences. A recurrent theme in the book is that to understand what has happened in Angola, one has to understand its history. Although Angola was home to a few dedicated conservationists, the country as a whole has always lacked the critical mass of environmentally aware people that would have led to the development of a national conservation ethic. This lack is attributed to several factors, including that 99% of the Angolan population was excluded from participating in political processes, the absence of genuine multi-generational Portuguese settlers, and low levels of educational and professional training among the colonists. There was thus no civic voice for conservation that could pressure the government to take action, and exploitation of the environment was the order of the pre-independence period.

Independence from Portugal in 1975 did not see an end to the war. The MPLA was in government in Luanda, but Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement (with support from South Africa), remained in control of vast tracts of rural Angola, where it survived by continued exploitation of the country's resources (mainly in the form of 'blood diamonds'). This finally ended in 2002 when Savimbi was killed in a skirmish with MPLA forces. However, the intervening period between independence and the end of the war had seen the rise of an urban, kleptocratic government in which a very small number of people in power amassed enormous wealth through resource exploitation, leaving the vast majority of Angolans in abject poverty. Any connection that there was to the natural environment was lost in a rapidly urbanising population. The collapse of agriculture left rural populations with no choice but to make a living through continued unsustainable utilisation of whatever natural resources they could access. In reality, this was the bushmeat trade, mopping up whatever was left of the wildlife; and the charcoal trade, based on unsustainable exploitation of woodland and forest trees.

Management of Angola's protected areas in the post-independence era has been limited, and characterised by political and official indifference or corruption. The few management interventions that have taken place have gone against almost every established principle of sustainable and effective conservation management (usually with the goal of enriching politicians or officials). Some examples that are provided in the book include the erection of highly expensive entrance gates to non-functional and degraded parks (in a country where it is close to impossible to obtain a tourist visa); ploughing up large tracts of natural vegetation to plant maize and citrus to attract elephants; the creation of fenced 'zoos' stocked with mammal species that have never occurred in the area; granting of mining leases over much of the protected area; erecting hundreds of kilometres of fences that start nowhere and end nowhere; and establishing a network of water points in arid zones, allowing permanent occupation by previously nomadic pastoralists and leading to environmental destruction. The situation seems almost hopeless, but, surprisingly, there are still a few people working for conservation in Angola. The final

chapter dwells on this hope, pointing to possible solutions that could be implemented following the perhaps inevitable collapse of the current crony-capitalist kleptocracy.

It is almost impossible to do justice to a book like this in such a short review. The depth and breadth of coverage is remarkable, spanning history and politics over a vast area, based largely on the personal and first-hand experience of a dedicated career ecologist. The important thing

is that all of the information is placed into the context of environmental management and conservation – something that no other book on Angola has done. It is a very well-written and absorbing book, and one that deserves to be read by serious conservationists globally, be they practitioners, policymakers or funders. It is also a serious warning to South Africans about what could become of their environment if the current trends of self-enrichment among the political elite are allowed to continue.

