

ON THE SIDE OF THE HUNTER

On behalf of the Boni people of Kenya, Daniel Stiles puts forward the case that traditional hunting can go hand in hand with conservation

"It was pathetic. Old tribesmen arrested and herded into reservations and branded as poachers, a menace to the ecology. It never occurred to anyone that they were the ecology." (Comment by Peter Beard, author of 'End of the Game').

Much has been written in the pages of WILDLIFE and other conservation and wildlife magazines about the decimation of wild animal populations by human hunters, invariably referred to as poachers. In most

cases, an anti-hunter attitude is justified, but there are conditions under which hunting by people is not nefarious, and I am not talking about game-cropping. The point that I want to argue is that a total ban on hunting, as exists in Kenya, can cause more harm than good to both people and the environment in the long run.

I have been conducting research with traditional hunting peoples in Kenya since 1978, and my results have led me to conclude that hunting is not all bad. A ban on hunting can mean a ban on an entire peo-



Daniel Stiles

ple's culture and way of life. This is the situation with the Boni people of Lamu District today.

The Boni, who call themselves Aweer (which means hunter in their language), live mainly in the forested area between the Tana River in Kenya and the Juba River in Somalia. They speak an Eastern Cushitic language most closely related to Somali and Rendille, pastoral peoples of Somalia and northern Kenya, and historical linguists estimate that the three groups split from the ancestral group about 2,000 years ago. The



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Left: forced to give up hunting and practise a slash and burn form of agriculture, the Boni are destroying the forest, home of countless animals, at a rate of 80 hectares a year. *Above:* topi (*Damaliscus lunatus*), the most common food animal of the Boni

term Boni derives from the Somali word *bon*, which refers to people of low caste, who are often hunters.

The local ecology undoubtedly had an important part to play in the formation of the Boni as a hunting-gathering people and in the continuance of this subsistence economy until recent times. The area inhabited by the Boni receives an average 650mm of rainfall annually. This would be enough to support the cultivation of maize, millet and sorghum, were it not for the fact that in most years there is either a drought or torrential downpours. This, together with poor soil fertility (mostly sand), is why no agricultural peoples have moved into Boni country, except along the coast and in parts near the Tana River.

Likewise, pastoralism is not viable because of heavy infestation of the forest by tsetse flies. Given the ecological situation, a hunting-gathering economy makes the most sense in terms of the value and reliability of return on energy expended.

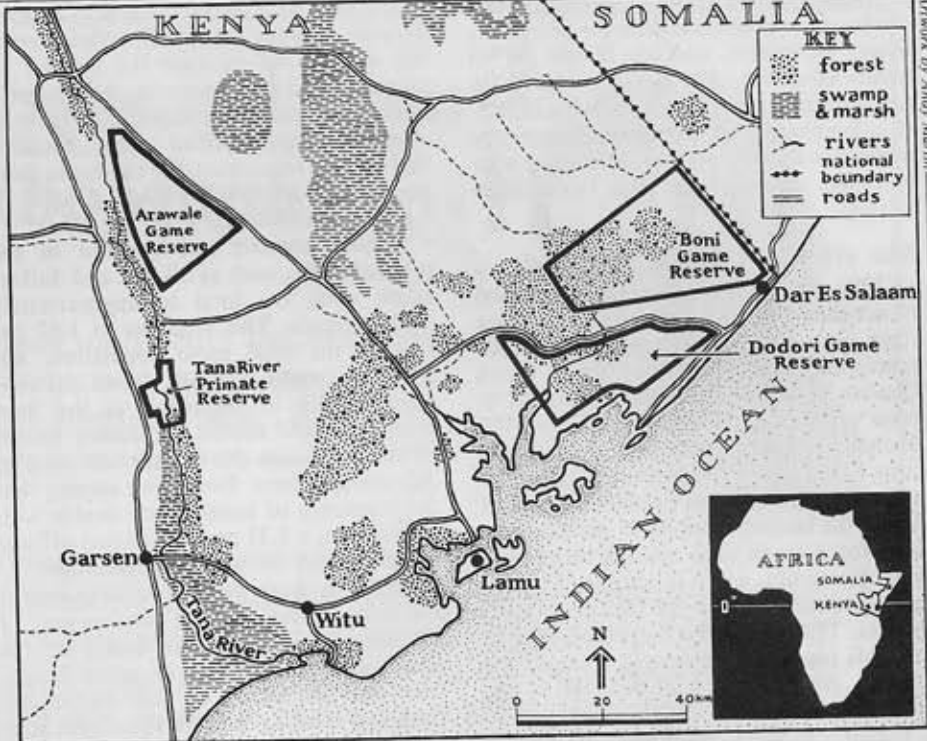
Hunting rituals

The Boni have been hunters for many centuries, and hunting has assumed an important place in their socio-cultural system. Traditional life revolves around rituals and ceremonies related to the hunt. Animals are categorized as small ones (*busha*) and large ones (*dua* or *binansi*). There are different types of arrow-heads and hunting techniques for different game, and until a man kills a *dua* (elephant, rhino, buffalo, or lion) he is called *munese*, meaning inexperienced hunter and, by implication, not yet a man.

When he first kills a *dua* there is a ceremony called *kerar*, in which songs of praise are sung, oil is poured onto his hair and shoulders by older women, and he is decorated with ornaments. He now becomes a *miso* and is considered a man.

The Boni do not eat every type of animal: those of the dog or cat family, porcupines, rats and monkeys are all taboo. They used to eat elephants, but with the nominal acceptance of Islam they no longer do so. This initially puzzled me, as the Koran has nothing to say about eating elephants. Upon more persistent questioning I eventually elicited a response that translated roughly as: "Have you ever tried cutting the throat of a wounded angry elephant?" This made sense. In Islam, an animal has to die by bleeding to death for it to be fit for human consumption. The Boni traditionally hunted with bow and poisoned arrows, and elephants died slowly and were dangerous up to the last moment.

The most common food animal is the topi, with which the forest abounds. Other animals commonly eaten include bushbuck, waterbuck (though the meat is not liked much) and zebra. Larger animals, such as buffalo and giraffe, are rarely killed because of the difficulty of bringing them



down with a spear or unpoisoned arrow (the Boni no longer use poison - *Acokanthera* roots or bark - because to be caught with any by game rangers means a beating and sometimes prison).

When traditions go

With governmental restrictions on hunting and encouragement of a change to cultivation, the Boni have taken up agriculture. As a result, their economic and cultural life has suffered, as has the forest ecology. The Boni practise a typical slash and burn agricultural system, in which new fields are cleared from the forest each year by cutting and burning. I have estimated that this process destroys up to 80 hectares of forest each year, which is colonized after the harvest mainly by useless Sodom apple plants (*Solanum incanum*).

Except for the most southern Boni village of Pandanguo, which is a region of more reliable rainfall, the Boni do not make a good living by agriculture and apparently never have. In 1942, George Adamson, then a game ranger, travelled through the Boni Forest and reported that the Boni were making only half-hearted attempts at cultivation. Fifteen years later, a Government official wrote: "To say that present agriculture in the Boni area is at subsistence level would be an optimistic statement. It is precarious and submarginal in extreme."

So what is to become of the Boni? In the present situation they cannot make a decent living, nor can they practise openly their age-old rituals surrounding the hunting life. In being forced to take up agriculture they are destroying the forest that provides the home and refuge of tens of thousands of

wild animals. So what would happen if the Boni were allowed to hunt again?

Should the Boni hunt?

The main fear is that they might begin large-scale trophy hunting, endangering populations of elephant, rhino and leopard. I firmly believe that this is not probable, nor even possible. The main threat to these animals is from Somali *shifita* (bandits), armed with modern weapons, whom the Boni fear as much as anyone.

The Boni have never hunted with rifles, as far as I can ascertain, and they express no desire to. Legalising hunting for food would not increase Boni hunting of elephant and rhino, because if they want to kill one of these animals today, they do.

Elephants are killed by the Boni on occasion, but only out of extreme need. The principal reason for risking a long prison sentence is brideprice. I attended a marriage ceremony a couple of years ago and was told that the brideprice was 5,000 shillings (at that time about £350), of which 1,500 had already been paid. I was astounded at such a high figure and asked how the young groom was ever going to find the 3,500 balance. In response, my informant shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said "pembe" (tusks). Considering the infrequency of Boni marriages, certainly not more than five a year among the whole community in Kenya, this did not seem such a heinous crime. The entire population of Boni in Kenya numbers less than 1,500, which brings me to my next point.

There are perhaps 150 potential active hunters in the Boni population. The traditional Boni territory in Kenya measures ap-

proximately 6,000 square kilometres, which works out to about one Boni for every four square kilometres, and one hunter per 40 square kilometres. The Boni are well within any standards of ecological carrying capacity of land suggested for hunter-gatherers by numerous authors, and the Boni forest is an optimum ecology for this subsistence strategy.

The effects of killing for food

In 1980, the Kenya Rangeland Ecological Monitoring Unit (KREMU) estimated that there were over 78,000 topi, about 5,600 zebra, and over 17,000 buffalo in Lamu District, in addition to many thousands of other types of antelopes, pigs and giraffe. Probably about 120,000 wild animals occupy Lamu District, not counting elephant and rhino. All of these animals are located within the hunting territory of the Boni, except for a small area around Mpekatoni and Mkunumbi, which is occupied by settled agriculturalists and the Dahalo hunting people. This means that there are about 20 animals per square kilometre - one of the densest concentrations of wildlife in the country.

Based on work conducted by Steven Harvey in 1975-76 in Pandanguo, I have estimated that 87 topi, 21 zebra, 15 water-buck and 21 other animals were killed for food in one year for a population of a little under 200 people. Hunting is more frequent

in the Boni villages to the north, as Pandanguo is more successful agriculturally, but even if we increase the number of animals killed by 50 per cent, for a population of 200 people we arrive at a figure of about 225 animals killed a year. Multiply this by 7.5, to account for the entire Boni population, and we arrive at a total of 1,688 animals killed a year.

Smaller animals not counted in the original study, such as dik-dik and duiker, might swell the total to approximately 2,000 animals. This amounts to 1.67 per cent of the total game population, not counting trophy animals. In an environment as rich in vegetation as the Boni forest, the wild animal population should be able to sustain this offtake rate with no deleterious effects. Even if we assume that the frequency of hunting will double with legalization, a 3.33 per cent annual offtake will not affect the wildlife populations.

Even if a more detailed wildlife census and study of Boni hunting patterns were to be made, the conclusions would be the same: wild animals are in more danger from the destruction of their habitat by slash and burn agriculture than from subsistence hunting.

It is a different story for the elephant and rhino, which should continue to be protected by stringent laws. The Boni will undoubtedly poach occasionally, regardless of the law, but not enough to pose a

demographic threat. The real menace are *shifita* poachers. In 1972, the elephant population of Lamu District was estimated at over 21,000, the second highest in the country. By 1977, the number was reduced to a little over 11,000 and by 1978 to an estimated 6,378. The 1980 KREMU estimate is a little over 4,000! This makes a reduction of over 80 per cent in eight years, a loss of more than 10 per cent a year from the 1972 population. The Boni certainly contributed to this reduction, but with their bows and poisoned arrows they were small-time compared to Somalis, armed with AK-47s and 303s. If the Boni were allowed to hunt, and if their attitude was pro-government, they could be of great assistance in locating these *shifita* bands that are decimating the elephant herds.

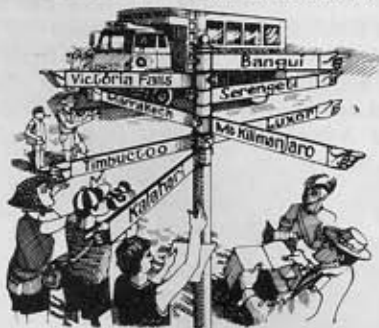
The balance between humans and the rest of nature would be restored by allowing the Boni to revert to a hunter-gatherer existence, the speed of forest destruction would diminish, and the Boni traditional culture would be strengthened. It is a more viable and more rational existence than the one envisaged by bureaucrats interested in 'progress and development', which in some cases leads to destruction and poverty. I would urge that knee-reflex opposition to hunting be reconsidered in the light of a more thorough understanding of the ecological and cultural consequences of a total ban.

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