CHAPTER 1

Picturing Landscape…and What Comes with It

Game Rangers’ Memoirs and Landscape

Past and present white, mostly European-descended, employees of national parks in Africa, game wardens and management alike, usually do not hold back in their praise for the ‘colonial aesthetic’ (Gikandi 1996: 167) of the landscape (including wildlife) they are working in (see, for some examples, Pitman 1942; Davison 1967; Kinloch 1972; Hey 1995). This also holds true for the string of employees of European descent working in the Sabi and Singwetsi Game Reserves that were amalgamated in 1926 into the Kruger National Park (KNP) in South Africa. Songs of praise and narratives in a memoirs format of game rangers and managers are widely found, starting in South Africa with the famous book of the first warden of KNP, James Stevenson-Hamilton (1993 [1937]). His book’s title, a ‘South African Eden’ (italics added), already refers to an ‘iconography of landscape’ (Cosgrove & Daniels 1988). The first sentences of the opening chapter start with the following landscape description:

It is the afternoon of July 25, 1902. On the edge of the last escarpment of the Drakensberg, overlooking the huddled welter of bush-clad ravines and rocky terraces which compose the foothills, my little caravan has come to a halt that I may for a while absorb the wonderful panorama of mountain and forest which has just disclosed itself. The sun, low in the west, is gilding the bare pinnacle of Legogote and is lending fleeting shades of delicate pink to the three peaks of Pretoriuskop – border beacons of the land of mystery beyond.

Stevenson-Hamilton 1993: 27, after 26 pages of introductory text by JANE CARRUTHERS

As MacKenzie (1997: 216) concludes concerning Stevenson Hamilton, although Hamilton was of Scottish origin, he was ‘British in his imperial affiliation, and powerfully committed to the African landscape, its animals and its people’ – and all at the same time, I would add. Mitchell (2002a) argues: ‘The vernacular expression suggests that the invitation to look at landscape is an invitation not to look at any specific thing, but to ignore all particulars in favour of an appreciation of a total gestalt, a vista or scene that may be dominated by some specific feature, but is not simply reducible to that feature’ (Mitchell 2002a: vii, italics in original). Other game rangers of the KNP would follow in
Stevenson-Hamilton’s footsteps, composing their memoirs, like the famous Harry Wolhuter (1948) who also lived and worked for many years in the KNP. Kobie Krüger, one of the few female writers in this genre, writing about living in the bush of the KNP with her game-ranger husband, still reiterates this refrain of the old European-based landscape song (cf. Anderson & Grove 1987; Van Vliet 2011), nearly 60 years after Stevenson-Hamilton. One of her books, based on her memoirs of that period, starts with: ‘Far from everywhere, in a remote corner of a vast expanse of lonely wilderness, two rivers meet: the Little Letaba and the Greater Letaba. On the northern bank of the confluence, you will find our house’ (Krüger 1994: 1, see also her other books: 1996; 2002). A very recent book on Kruger (Reardon 2012: 5) starts with: ‘One crisp winter morning, I stood on the crest of Nkumbe Escarpment in southeast-central Kruger National Park, and gazed1 westward across weathered straw-yellow grassy plains furrowed by a drainage line’s winding green course. There was barely a sound or sight to remind me of the immediate century; it was like peering into the past… It was an image of old Africa distilled’.2 Books full of romanticism about times imme-
morial, all solidly referring to and even ‘imposing’ (cf. Neumann 1998) a par-
ticular iconographic and masculine construction of wilderness landscape, so common to, if not outright undergirding, most of conservation ideology. Landscapes are solidly positioned in opposition to spaces occupied and degraded by humans: ‘(w)ilderness, originally the space beyond the pale – the common boundary fence – a place where wild beasts roamed, a lawless region, a fearful place with no value to anyone but hermits and prophets, has been promoted to sacred place and city has been demoted to wasteland, revealing a belief that humans degrade what they touch, leading to failure to link land-
scapes of production, waste and renewal’ (Whiston Spirn 1998: 69). Or yet in still other words, imagined wilderness landscapes were used to ‘conquer and transform the new environment [as they contrasted with Africanist under-
standings of landscape3] as well as to critique the problems of urban industrial society’ (Bender Shetler 2007: 17). This landscapism not only holds for the publicly managed wildlife areas such as national parks described by the example of the KNP but also for the privately owned reserves in South and southern Africa. In his memoirs of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve, basically a private

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1 Italics added, see note 4.
2 See also the many romantic descriptions and stories by game rangers, across mainly southern Africa, of the wilderness and the bush, through a modern day medium: http://www.rangerdiaries.com (visited 13 January 2013).
3 As noted in Bender Shetler (ibid.), see, for instance, Ranger 1999 and McGregor 2003 (in Beinart and McGregor 2003).