In the 1890s and 1900s in what is today the Eastern Cape of South Africa, colonial authorities expanded their control over the peoples and environments of the recently annexed territories of the Transkei. While magistrates engineered a colonization of the social landscape of the Transkei, forest officers worked to ‘save’ local flora and fauna from popular ‘abuse’ and ‘destruction’. In the government’s efforts to restrict African access to forest resources, one intervention in particular spawned repeated conflicts and controversies in African communities: the mass killing of Africans’ dogs. For foresters, the systematic poisoning and shooting of African-owned dogs was promoted as essential to undermine African men’s abilities to engage in hunting pursuits and thereby protect both local wildlife and European sport. Yet as local residents encountered state dog-killing, they imbued government actions and intentions with more profound meaning than officials anticipated. Already coping with a debilitating combination of ecological pressures, such as drought and livestock diseases and colonial interventions affecting everything from land tenure to medical practices, African men and women perceived the government’s attacks on their animals as concerning much more than dogs or hunting. Popular responses to dog-killing reflected deeper frustrations, not only with the government’s restrictions on local forest use but with the broader colonial domination of local livelihoods and landscapes during this period.

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As in other colonial spheres in southern Africa, a mix of political, cultural and environmental interests inspired official attempts to control African hunting activities in the Transkei. With growing anxieties over the environmental impact of colonial expansion and the prospects for settler progress amid a dwindling natural resource base, Cape authorities established governmental forest preserves and restrictions on European and African forest use in the mid- to late 1800s. These schemes were then the springboard of restructuring forest use and access and for integrating social and ecological control over African communities in the territories. Hunting restrictions from the 1890s onwards were thus part of a broader strategy of constraining Africans’ environmental practices and mobility. Moreover, while conservators and magistrates publicly extolled the virtues of preserving specific wildlife species in local forests, particularly various types of antelope, they simultaneously sought to reserve hunting as the privilege of the small community of European sportsmen in the territories. These concerns increasingly translated into policy; from the late 1880s onward, African hunters faced a growing number of regulatory constraints, such as permit obligations, closed seasons and animal species reservation.

As colonial officials instituted an increasingly restrictive program of wildlife management at the turn of the century, they repeatedly encountered popular resentment and resistance. Rural men and women, experiencing such restrictions amid a host of other impositions on access to local forest resources, responded by making formal protests to government, evading forest patrols and even physically attacking local forest guards. Official regulation of African men’s hunting practices was an arena of particular contestation during this period. In many communities hunting not only provided sources of meat and skins for both local use and trade, but was also an important dimension of male

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2 For more on the nature of hunting restrictions in the region, see chapter 4 of my ‘Roots and rights in the Transkei: colonialism, natural resources, and social change, 1880–1940’ (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Minnesota, 2002).

3 These dynamics are explored at length in my ‘Roots and rights in the Transkei’.