

THE PONGOLA GAME RESERVE: AN ECO-POLITICAL STUDY

E.J. CARRUTHERS

*Department of History
University of South Africa
P.O. Box 392
Pretoria
0001*

Abstract — The Pongola Game Reserve, which existed from 1894 to 1921, is placed in its historical context. The attitudes of its administrators are explored and use is made of previously neglected archival material.

Historiographical survey

The Pongola Game Reserve was the first proclaimed government game reserve in South Africa.¹ Unlike most pioneering ventures which remain intrinsically important, the Pongola reserve has not followed this course. This is partly explicable in terms of the changes it has undergone. In fact it now barely exists in its original form and consequently any significance it may have must be sought in the impact its establishment exerted on later conservation measures in South Africa, and in an evaluation of its later history.

Although most histories of conservation mention it briefly, there has been no detailed study of the Pongola Game Reserve and only one article has been devoted to it.² The present paper is an aspect of a wider study, as yet incomplete, on nature conservation in the Transvaal from the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War. There has been a dimension lacking in the conservationist historiography of the Pongola Reserve in that it has not been put into the context of events in the country at the time and this paper is an attempt to rectify this. The proclamation of the game reserve and the appointment of the first warden have been treated in isolation by scientists and conservationists. On the other hand, historians of northern Natal and imperial expansion have ignored the reserve and concentrated on the political role of its warden. The two fields of research have not been combined. In addition, archival research on the reserve has been desultory. What follows is an exploration of documentary material previously neglected.

The Zulu northern frontier: 1880-1894

It had become evident by the 1880s that the hunting frontier in the Transvaal was finally closing and that game as a resource was becoming scarce. The government of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (Z.A.R.) under Paul Kruger took the initiative in August 1889 of setting aside seven

government-owned farms as an area where hunting would be totally prohibited.³ These particular farms were situated along the Pongola River in the south-eastern corner of the Transvaal, with the river forming the southern boundary, Swaziland the northern, the Lebombo crest the eastern and the Rooi Rand the western limit. Topographically the region is therefore a basin, varying in altitude from lowveld in the east to very high ground in the west. Because of the unhealthiness of the climate the region was sparsely inhabited and the Tembe-Tsonga people were concentrated in the flood plain formed by the Pongola River to the east of the mountains where it was possible to cultivate regular crops in the silt deposit. During the summer months, the mountains were fairly densely populated on the eastern side.⁴

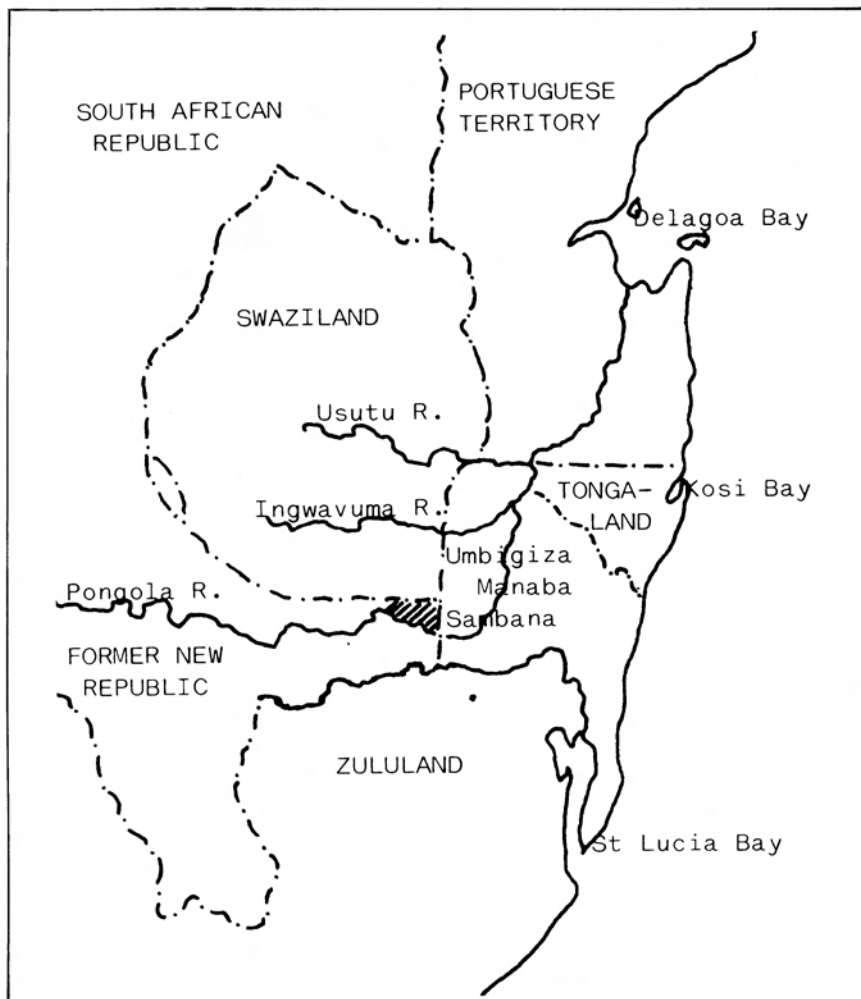


Fig. 1. Reference map of the general location of the Pongola Game Reserve. Based on Garson (1957) and Harries (1983).

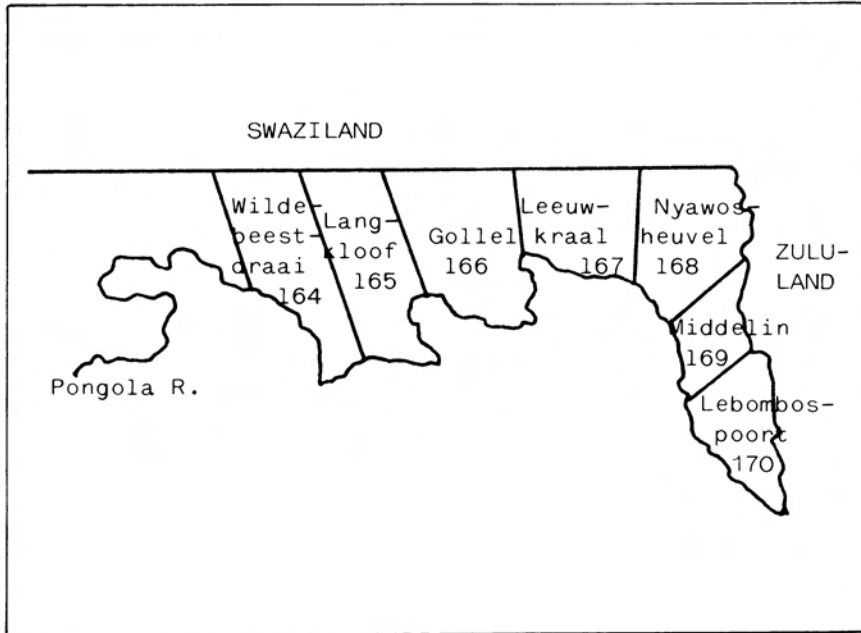


Fig. 2. Map indicating the seven farms comprising the Pongola Game Reserve. Union of South Africa, Transvaal Province, Magisterial District of Piet Retief 1:297504, No. 17, S.G. Pretoria June 1920.

As is often the case with conservation decisions taken by governments today, political considerations were significant in the desire to proclaim the Pongola area as a game reserve. Although it was stated in the Volksraad that the reason for the reserve was to preserve game, there were in fact vast tracts of suitable unallocated government ground elsewhere which were being suggested for this purpose. For example, what was to become the far larger Sabi Game Reserve was being outlined at this time. But occupation of the spit of land including the Pongola Poort and the northern bank of the river in particular, was crucial to the Transvaal government for it formed an integral part of its envisioned access to the sea.

Events in northern Natal (kwaZulu) were complex at this time and have been thoroughly analyzed elsewhere.⁵ For the purposes of elucidating the development of the Pongola Reserve a very brief outline is all that is necessary here. The boundaries between Zulu, Tembe-Tsonga, Swazi, Transvaal and British territories were in a state of flux. They had not been conclusively defined and surveyed. Indeed, earlier there had been no reason to do so, for the region was unhealthy and not particularly desirable. Moreover, other prize land was still obtainable. Neither was there any major African clan or chieftain strong enough to claim unchallenged supremacy in the region and it was used by the Swazi, the various Tembe-Tsonga and Maputo groups as well as Zulu, white agents and concession seekers. The

Transvaal required an outlet to the sea and a harbour of its own completely free from British influence. Tongaland increased in strategic importance as other points of coastal access were successively blocked. By the late 1880s it was therefore strategically vital for the Transvaal to present a persuasive claim to land adjoining Tongaland in the hope, and expectation, that a portion of Tsonga country might be annexed to the Transvaal and Kosi Bay become the long dreamed-of harbour. British policy vacillated between allowing the Transvaal to claim Tongaland and annexing it to Zululand as part of imperial expansion. Under these circumstances, agents of the Transvaal and British governments jockeyed for influence with the chieftains of the region in an attempt to achieve hegemony. How best to lay claim to the northern bank of the Pongola River was clearly the Transvaal's most pressing problem. Private owners would not have been prepared to occupy these farms and possession would be more secure if in the hands of the state. So the proclamation of a game reserve — an idea which had gained currency and respectability in the Transvaal in the preceding decade — was a solution to the political frustration confronting Kruger's government. A game reserve meant *de jure* ownership and occupation without expensive administration. Moreover, in the interests of game protection, all interlopers were barred from entry.

Even before this decision was taken, the Transvaal had been compelled to protect its interests in the region and two paid secret agents were appointed to live on the land of Chief Sambana on the high ground north of the Pongola Poort. Sambana's country was bordered by Swaziland, the Z.A.R. (some of his kraals were in the Republic in the proposed game reserve) and to the north, land belonging to a minor chief, Umbigiza. The territories of Sambana and Umbigiza have been called the transPongola and the two chiefs were the clients at various times of the Maputo, the Zulu, the Swazi, the British and the Boers. Sambana required protection from his neighbours from time to time and the two Transvaal agents, J.J. Ferreira and H.F. Van Oordt, arrived in July 1889 to ensure it. They were also to strengthen Transvaal influence over the chief in any way possible, for instance, by offering advice or collecting taxes and tribute or binding him in agreements and treaties. Ferreira had been in the area since about 1885 collecting hut taxes from Sambana's people in the Transvaal but Van Oordt was a new appointment.

Pongola Game Reserve proclaimed: 1894

Van Oordt was later to become the first game warden or ranger of the Pongola Game Reserve, which was formally proclaimed on 13 June 1894 and his appointment as warden was made in the same month.⁶ Van Oordt was born in 1862 in Holland and emigrated to South Africa where he had influential and well-connected relatives. He lived in the Cape for a time and in 1887 came to the Transvaal, where, with the assistance of a cousin, he gained employment with the Z.A.R. as a secret agent to Sambana. It is fortunate that many of Van Oordt's letters written at this time to his family have been preserved and published, although regrettably, he has no direct comment on the game reserve or its conception.⁷ He was well educated, wrote for newspapers and read widely. On his arrival in the transPongola Van Oordt was able to indulge his love of hunting. He comments on the abundance of game in the area, whereas in the more settled parts it had been

almost exterminated. He sent skins of lion *Panthera leo* and leopard *P. pardus*, ostrich feathers and biltong to Holland. He burnt the long grass on the mountains to attract the game and built a house, well-placed high up on the western Lebombos where it was frequently misty and wet.

No research had been done by the Volksraad before its decision to establish a game reserve in August 1889, and a two-man commission was appointed to determine whether the seven Pongola farms were indeed suitable for this purpose. The Native Commissioner and secret agent, J.J. Ferreira and the boundary commissioner, L.J. Meyer, were to investigate the area and draft a report. They were instructed to exclude land already in private possession or suitable for white occupation. When no report was forthcoming a year later, because Ferreira had not answered the letters sent to him, he was dropped from the commission and Meyer was instructed to proceed on his own. Events moved in an unhurried fashion. There was, after all, no rush, for after 1888 the southern bank of the Pongola River had become part of the Transvaal with the annexation of the New Republic as the district of Vryheid. Moreover, the poort was not visited by large numbers of hunters, the Africans there were not particularly destructive and the British showed no immediate interest.

In May 1891 W.J. Leyds, the State Secretary, compiled a memorandum in which his opinion on certain problems regarding the game reserve were clarified.⁸ The question of size was the first issue and Leyds considered it large enough. He disagreed strongly with the contrary views of Commissioner Meyer who argued that the privately owned farms south of the river (in what had been the New Republic) should be bought and the reserve extended to the Mkuzi River. Meyer had even offered to negotiate for these farms and act as honorary ranger.⁹ Leyds contended that the government had the right to set regulations and determine punishments for transgressors and that supervision by a game warden was necessary. He thought however, that the wardenship would not be a full-time occupation and that other duties should be allocated too — presumably control of Africans and general border duties. Meyer had suggested a candidate, G.R. Botha, for this post.

Leyds asked the Acting Native Commissioner, F.A. Lammerding, to report on the number of people living in the area, for it was deemed desirable that residents should be removed. Lammerding replied in July 1892 that there were very few people there, particularly after the outbreak of smallpox, and that a game reserve was an excellent idea. In December Leyds noted that the question of proclamation hinged on resettling the Africans. This required Sambana's co-operation and here the influence which Ferreira and Van Oordt exerted would prove significant.

In 1893 the game reserve question again proceeded slowly and one of the farms was even leased for grazing purposes.¹⁰ The correspondence began again in October when Van Oordt accepted the position of game warden. He stated that his qualifications for the post included an intimate knowledge of the region and the Africans. Significantly in view of his relationship with the people in the region, he asked that he be allowed to punish personally those who defied game reserve regulations. The Surveyor-General was asked for his assistance, but was unsure of what his role could be for the indefinite boundary meant that he could not comment on where the Transvaal began or

ended. This complicated matters somewhat, for Sambana might refuse to comply with Z.A.R. wishes to move his people.

Although the years 1889-1894 had seen slow progress in connection with proclaiming the game reserve, Van Oordt had attracted attention during this time and was under the surveillance of the British. It seems that his endeavours to influence Sambana were not limited to peaceful or legitimate means. In 1891 the Z.A.R. was warned to restrain Ferreira and Van Oordt from extorting taxes and from encroaching their authority into Sambana's territory. In August 1894, just after his appointment as game warden, the British complained again that Ferreira and Van Oordt were engaged in making themselves the masters of "Zambaansland". In March 1895, Van Oordt was accused of assaulting Sambana's daughter after a beer-drink and of flogging and ill-treating others. Although the British were rivals for Sambana's territory, there was some truth in these accusations and they strengthened the British resolve to annex all of Tongaland. On 30 May 1895 the annexation was suddenly announced and its effect was that the Z.A.R. was finally cut off from the sea. Van Oordt was surprised and distressed — "this unexpected blow struck us like a bolt from the blue".¹¹ He protested against the annexation and tried to persuade Sambana to reconsider his collaboration in the scheme. It was rumoured during early 1896 that Van Oordt felt so strongly that he planned to organize a commando from Piet Retief to attack Sambana. Van Oordt had not felt it expedient or necessary to move from his house in the transPongola into the game reserve and refused British entreaties and offers of compensation to do so. Although rumours of his rebellion were not well-founded, Van Oordt was too controversial a character to be allowed to remain in British territory and he was finally evicted in November 1896.

Van Oordt as Warden: 1894-1899

Van Oordt took seriously his job as warden of the game reserve and informer for the government and wrote a comprehensive formal annual report for each of the four years he was employed. It seems that his hunting activities continued after his appointment. In April 1896 he signed a petition asking that government farms be opened for shooting during the year¹² and Stevenson-Hamilton later claimed that Van Oordt exploited his official position — "the Hollander official placed in charge . . . seems to have shot nearly everything".¹³

Given Van Oordt's involvement in political affairs it is not surprising that his annual reports reflect more than merely game matters.¹⁴ Indeed, if one is to judge from the notes in the margins of his reports it was the political content which was considered by his superiors the more important. In his first report, August 1894-August 1895, Van Oordt explained how the unexpected British annexation had hindered his work as warden, especially as the game reserve fell within the Transvaal portion of "Zambaansland". Sambana's major maize fields that year appear to have been within the reserve, which was traditionally his personal hunting ground. There was trouble from the north as well, as the Swazi laid claim to the game reserve (after 1895 the Z.A.R. controlled Swaziland) entering it with weapons and Van Oordt was involved in a *fracas* with an armed band. Because he was the Resident Justice of the

Peace, Van Oordt was able to act autocratically and personally administer the law. He claimed that his harsh punishments — hard labour, lashes and the levying of fines — had had a salutary effect on poaching, for the legitimate hunters of the season before were now poachers. Van Oordt was gratified that the game was becoming tame and more numerous. He was observant and detailed the species of animals which he found and commented on the landscape, fires, diseases and the unhealthiness of the climate. He was afraid that British laxity in controlling the trade in arms, plus the enticement of the five game reserves in Zululand (proclaimed by the British in 1895) would lead to increased poaching. He had realised even before the end of his first year, as had Meyer before him, that the reserve was too small for a large permanent population of game and his report concluded with a plea to extend the reserve. Predictably, his suggestion was that land to the north, *i.e.* the transPongola, would be eminently suitable for incorporation.

The second Annual Report of 1895-1896 recorded no marked changes. The game was slightly more numerous and tamer but, contrary to his prediction, no new species had come in. He attributed this to the contentment of the animals in the game reserves in British territory although the barrier of the Pongola Poort and the fact that there was no migration route through the poort were probably the weightier reasons. He noted that there had been little shooting in the reserve during the year with two exceptions — the Swazi and the Boers who owned winter farms adjacent to the reserve. The most crucial event of the year was the rinderpest and although Van Oordt had heard reports of the disease, it had not yet reached his reserve.

The third report dealt mainly with rinderpest. The feared disease had not yet broken out but was expected. It had also not occurred in the game reserves in British Zululand, which in Van Oordt's opinion was most fortunate for he considered that these contained the most game to be found in all of southern Africa. He also went into some detail about nagana which was rife in the area. Moreover, he had his staff problems too. Working under him were two white mounted police, J.J.S. Maritz and E.J. De Beer,¹⁵ seconded by the customs department, and four black constables. This is a large number of people for a small reserve and is an indication of the strategic importance the Z.A.R. attached to the area. There were difficulties in paying these men and attracting staff who were not local because of the remoteness and loneliness of the reserve.

Van Oordt's observations about the rinderpest attracted the interest of the government. Dr. J.W.B. Gunning, the Director of the Zoological Gardens and Museum in Pretoria was asked to correspond with Van Oordt on the disease, particularly the susceptibility and reaction of the different species of game to it. In March 1898 Van Oordt provided Gunning with the required information.¹⁶

Van Oordt's last Annual Report, 1897-1898, makes depressing reading. The dreaded rinderpest had swept through the reserve. Fever had also taken its toll, killing several of his black assistants and his only daughter. This report deals mainly with political events however, for war was in the air and border questions came to the fore as did the flight of fugitives over them.

It is clear from his reports that Van Oordt saw his official task primarily in

terms of police work and game keeping, but he was also observant and informative. Like other hunters, his concern was for big game and the small animals were virtually ignored.

One of his observations has direct relevance for scientific investigation even today. The Warden of the Kruger National Park advises that Van Oordt's mention of both hartebeest *Alcelaphus buselaphus* and tsessebe *Damaliscus lunatus* in the Pongola Reserve tempted scientists to conclude that these were Lichtenstein's hartebeests *Alcelaphus lichtensteinii*. However, it has now been suggested that Van Oordt's records refer to the northern limit of the Natal red hartebeest. In Van Oordt's reports, there is also evidence of the fascination of that time with abnormalities in animals and with their tameness. But he was also far-sighted enough to state that this reserve was not only valuable for the Transvaal of that time, but for the world in the future and was, perhaps prophetically, concerned that it was not large enough for this purpose. The outbreak of the rinderpest brought him into contact with the scientific fraternity and his observations on the disease were a matter of some importance to the government.

His role as political agent and Native Commissioner were not reduced on his appointment as warden. He continued to act as sentinel on an important, but wild, border post. Sambana's people submitted to Van Oordt's control; he extracted taxes from them and they were consequently permitted to remain within the reserve. The responsibilities delegated by the state to Van Oordt set precedents which survived the changes of government in the Transvaal. These included total freedom over game management and administrative functions, but more importantly, incorporated the concept that a game warden was plenipotentiary over his reserve.

By the time the Anglo-Boer War broke out in 1899 the Pongola was not the sole Transvaal game reserve. Not only had the Sabi Reserve been proclaimed but hunting had been prohibited on government ground in various parts of the Transvaal. The outbreak of war meant chaos in South Africa and the game reserves were simply abandoned. If Van Oordt wrote a report in his final year, it has not been located and he suffered the personal fate of being a prisoner-of-war. His reserve was left unattended but possibly suffered less than other parts of the country for the area was not an important theatre of war.

Native Affairs Department takes control: 1900-1906

After the capture of Pretoria in 1900 the British occupied the Transvaal although the guerilla phase of the war continued. British administration brought with it an influx of Victorian English sporting gentlemen, both military and civilian, to whom game and its protection were important and serious matters and steps were taken to limit shooting. After peace was declared, game preservation was put under the control of the Native Affairs Department and its Commissioner, Sir Godfrey Lagden, a game enthusiast. Major J. Stevenson-Hamilton was appointed Warden of the Sabi Reserve in mid-1902. It would seem that the British administration was initially unaware of the existence of the Pongola Game Reserve. Stevenson-Hamilton heard about it and brought it to the attention of the Native Commissioner in Lydenburg and the sub-Native Commissioner in Wakkerstroom, L. Tyrrell,

was asked to investigate. Two weeks later he replied. Six farms were involved, the keeper had been named Van Oordt and there was little game. A further report followed in April, by which time Tyrrell had discovered that eight farms had been proclaimed and that a black rhino *Diceros bicornis* and elephant *Loxodonta africana* were seen occasionally but not much else. Independently, the Resident Magistrate of Wakkerstroom, A.J. Bentinck, advised the government that he had heard about a game reserve but could not verify the matter as the records of the Landdrost at Piet Retief had been destroyed.¹⁷

Lagden moved quickly on receipt of these reports, and on 21st April 1903 the Executive Council approved the re-proclamation of the game reserve. Even then the number of farms was uncertain but by the time the proclamation was published in June the seven original farms appeared.¹⁸ Before the formal proclamation, Major A.A. Fraser was being proposed for the post of game warden for this reserve, under Stevenson-Hamilton. He was described by the Secretary for Native Affairs in May 1903 as a retired officer¹⁹ and his history as supplied to the National Parks Board in 1977 states that he had been a commanding officer in India and South Africa.²⁰ Stevenson-Hamilton suggests that W. Windham, the Secretary for Native Affairs, had recommended Fraser for the post and describes him as a large, hard-drinking Scot, lamenting the fact that he was merely a "gamekeeper" who would not commit his observations or knowledge to paper.²¹

At the end of 1903 Stevenson-Hamilton visited the reserve and sent in a special report. Because it was mid-summer, the rivers were swollen and it took him a week to get from Sabi Bridge to the Pongola Reserve along the eastern boundary. His description of the topography accords exactly with Van Oordt's — he too was struck by the flatness of the basin between Rooi Rand and the Lebombos and the prevalence of flat-topped mimosas, which Van Oordt had called haak-en-steek. Stevenson-Hamilton was disappointed to find little game and speculated that what little Van Oordt had left had been further decimated by farmers and Africans during the war.²² Although few in number, the Swazi regularly hunted in the reserve, their traditional hunting grounds, for there was no boundary, natural or artificial, between Swaziland and the reserve.

Apart from noting that there was little game, Stevenson-Hamilton considered that it would never be numerous there, for he realized immediately that the reserve was not big enough to hold a large permanent population. It was topographically unsuitable to attract game from Zululand and was merely on a migration route on the westward side of the Lebombos towards the water holes in Swaziland. He suggested extending the reserve to make it more viable. How this might be done was unclear, for the Transvaal no longer owned the southern bank of the Pongola River, as Vryheid had been annexed to Natal towards the end of the war and Swaziland was no longer under the control of the Transvaal. If the extension could not be done, Stevenson-Hamilton felt that part of the reserve might be utilized as a "deer park" or "game nursery". Animals could be bred and tamed there and supplied to zoos or farmers. He felt that two black rangers would be sufficient to police the area, in contrast with the Z.A.R. staff of seven. But Fraser had already been installed and had evicted all the resident Africans.

Stevenson-Hamilton did not suggest that Fraser be removed at that time, although he felt that his salary should be reduced because the location of the house Van Oordt had built within the reserve, after he had moved from the transPongola, was so healthy.

Stevenson-Hamilton wrote regular monthly and annual reports in which the Pongola Reserve is mentioned until 1906, although usually very cursorily. In January 1904 for instance, he said that "All was quiet" and that there were a few kudu²³ *Tragelaphus strepsiceros* and in April some Natal Africans were handed over to Natal for being in possession of unlicensed firearms as there was not enough evidence to prosecute them in Piet Retief.²⁴ In February 1904, Stevenson-Hamilton had no qualms about moving Fraser to the new Singwitsi Reserve, which he regarded as being more important than the Pongola. Not only was it far larger, but it contained a great variety of animals and habitats.²⁵ Worried about the lack of white supervision in Pongola however, Stevenson-Hamilton hoped that funds would permit the appointment of a white ranger the following financial year²⁶ but doubted that this was possible. He was not willing to compromise the Sabi and Singwitsi for the sake of the Pongola. Although Stevenson-Hamilton hoped to visit the reserve in August or September 1904 there is no record of his doing so.²⁷

During 1905 Stevenson-Hamilton approached the Secretary for Native Affairs in an attempt to employ a white ranger in the Pongola because he realised that no matter how effective the black rangers were they could only control black poachers and could do nothing to prevent whites from entering the reserve.²⁸ The department was reluctant to spend a large sum of money on the Pongola Reserve, as was Stevenson-Hamilton, and ways were investigated of avoiding expense. The first move was to suggest that Swaziland, now independent, administer the reserve, for in May 1905 the Hlatikulu Game Reserve, adjacent to the Pongola, had been proclaimed but this proposal came to nought.²⁹ The next tactic was an endeavour to place the reserve under the control of the Magistrate at Ingwavuma (now part of Natal), the nearest civil authority. The Magistrate, R.D. Talbot, indicated his willingness to help and advised that C.C. Jackson of his department had already been of assistance since Fraser's departure. However, accommodation between the two colonies was impossible to formalize owing to the difficulties involved in cross-boundary prosecutions. So another solution had to be found. In September, R.D. Gillespie, the Resident Justice of the Peace at Welkom (Wakkerstroom District), whose job it was to supervise black-owned farms in the region, agreed to help, asking for £5 per month plus travelling expenses. He had observed much trespassing since Fraser's departure but there had never been sufficient evidence to prosecute. Stevenson-Hamilton felt that the charge was too high and wanted to meet Gillespie to discuss the matter, but no such meeting took place. In January 1906 Stevenson-Hamilton again visited the Pongola Reserve (it appears to have been the last time he did so) and reported that the conditions regarding the game were much the same as they had been in 1903. He repeated his comment that no large game was permanently resident. He was distressed to discover that Sambana's son, Moses "Inyeou", a missionary, had taken over the ranger's house, and that as his missionary activities were confined to women, the area was becoming a centre of immorality and asked that he be

removed. Another mission station at "Gwalineem" had also to be moved at this time.³⁰

Involvement of the Colonial Secretary's Department: 1906-1910

During 1905 control of the game reserves had been transferred from the Native Affairs Department to the Colonial Secretary, and without Lagden's enthusiasm the continuing existence of the Pongola Reserve was for the first time called into question and Stevenson-Hamilton was asked for his opinion. Although not particularly keen to keep it, he felt that the area was suitable for no other purpose. He felt that it would be a pity simply to abandon it, as no alternative land use was proposed and the area would administratively remain a vacuum. Gillespie had been asked for his opinion too, as the man-on-the-spot, and Stevenson-Hamilton thought that it should be considered before any decision was made. The views of the Transvaal Game Protection Association were also sought and the committee disapproved strongly of giving up the reserve, even if no funds could be found for its upkeep. Its retention was of value to Natal's reserves, as a buffer area if nothing else. Gillespie too, could present no tangible argument for retaining the reserve and the Colonial Secretary made his decision. Recognising that there was no good reason for abolishing the reserve, it was to be kept, but no money made available for its maintenance.

Gillespie did not lose interest in the area after this decision nor did the two black rangers who continued to live in the reserve and police it, despite their dismissal from their posts. Interest in the reserve was re-kindled with the appointment of J.C. Smuts as Colonial Secretary, after the grant of Responsible Government to the Transvaal in 1907. He wanted to re-establish formal control. But Stevenson-Hamilton was determined not to use any money for this purpose which could be better spent on the Sabi and Singwitsi and these were only just managing anyway. So the Swazi government was again approached and the Assistant Commissioner of Hlatikulu agreed to exercise what control he could. The following year, C.F.A. Wundram was permitted to open a store on the reserve, provided he too kept a watch on it. He was very interested in preserving game but there is no evidence that he actually policed the reserve. One letter of his survives and he describes the area as ". . . this forsaken place of our country, which was once upon a time a lively (sic) and pleasant place for holiday spenders and others who put (sic) interests in game and views etc." He found the region wild, with very little game, which he attributed to the presence of lions! He accused the Swazis and Zulus of hunting with dogs in the reserve and considered the appointment of policemen and rangers to be vital to the continuing existence of anything of value in the reserve. Wundram's concern was shared by F. King, the District Commander of the police at Wakkerstroom, but the government remained unmoved. Stevenson-Hamilton wanted to resuscitate Gillespie's scheme for regular visits by a competent authority but Smuts would approve nothing until the ultimate fate of the reserve had been settled.

After Union: 1910-1921

No decision was taken at this time and the next development was a petition to the Attorney-General from the residents in Piet Retief in 1909, which

included a request for a white warden because of “abuses”. It was suggested that he would undertake agricultural duties too.³¹ Reaction was delayed because of the change in constitutional status at Union in 1910, and it was only a year later that the matter was raised again, with a comment from the Piet Retief Magistrate that two black constables who had been re-employed seemed to be ineffective and their services were dispensed with. He suggested joint Swazi supervision with a white warden responsible for the entire bushveld region.

After Union, the Magistrate at Piet Retief was asked to oversee the reserve and he submitted two reports, one in January 1914 and the other in June 1916. It is not clear from these short letters however, whether the Magistrate visited the reserve himself but it seems unlikely. His remarks about game were very generalized; he noted an increase in vermin and in poaching but gave no details. Stevenson-Hamilton had lost interest in the Pongola Game Reserve completely after 1910, considering expense on it a waste of money and the Provincial Government was not as concerned as the British or Smuts had been. The Transvaal Game Protection Association was not indifferent to the reserve, mentioning it in some of its reports, but could not render any real assistance. As far as scientific work was concerned, in 1914 disease again provided a link between the Transvaal Museum and the reserve. The Assistant Director of the Museum was given permission to shoot two animals of each species of game as part of Dr Arnold Theiler’s investigations into nagana.

The intrusion of the First World War naturally also disrupted affairs and not until 1920 was interest in the Pongola Reserve revived. The Magistrate at Piet Retief arranged that F.E. Marx, a Native Affairs employee, visit the reserve. Marx’s report gives some interesting details, especially as no first hand account of conditions in the reserve had been given for fourteen years. Marx stayed on the farm Wildebeestdraai for a night and found four unauthorized Swazi kraals under Chief Sitambi. They had been sowing their crops and cutting trees. But contrary to expectation, as it was always alleged by the government and the game protection associations that the Africans were the principal destroyers of game, there were plenty of animals and they were tame. On Gollel were more of Sitambi’s people (sixty on the two farms) also sowing crops and owning goats and cattle. Once again, game was numerous, varied and tame — Marx even had reports of five elephant. On Rooi Rand Poort he found a few wild dogs *Lycaon pictus*, not at all the scourge the Game Protection Association had written about, and plenty of kudu and waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*. Unfortunately for those interested in the Pongola Reserve, Marx, who had already lost two donkeys to sickness, became seriously ill himself and had to return to Piet Retief without completing the survey. A most important observation however, is that he found no evidence of tsetse or nagana and no Africans reported the occurrence of the disease in the Pongola Reserve. Marx concluded his report by making game management suggestions concerning wardens, moving the people out of the reserve, grass-burning and vermin control.

The Transvaal Provincial Administration did not have time to act on Marx’s recommendations, even if they considered doing so, for at the end of October 1920, the Minister of Lands, H. Mentz, wrote to the Administrator asking

whether he could have the reserve for settlement purposes. He had heard that it was small, unsupervised and of little use, and his department needed land for both white and black settlement. As an added incentive, perhaps to Stevenson-Hamilton, he suggested that some of the Pongola farms could be used in exchange for land on the Sabi Reserve boundaries. In the lack of discussion on the abolition and the promptness with which the proclamation was drafted and published, one can almost sense the relief in the Province at having, at last, a sound reason for getting out of the area.³²

It is difficult to assess the role played by the black rangers of the Pongola Reserve. The dedication of two of them to their tasks after they had been made redundant has already been mentioned. When funding ceased after Union one of these men, known only from the documents as Nondwai, continued to act for years in an honorary capacity and had been instrumental in bringing two parties of poachers, one Swazi the other white, to justice. His self-imposed charge may possibly have been critical to conservation in the area.

De-proclamation and after: 1921-1942

It has been suggested previously, and latterly accepted without question³³ that the Pongola Game Reserve was abolished because of the incidence of nagana in the region, particularly following the outbreaks in Natal. There is no evidence that it was a major consideration, if one at all. Theiler's investigation during the First World War had no impact on provincial action in respect of the Pongola Reserve. Marx commented in 1920 that there was no nagana. The proclamation abolishing the reserve in 1921 specifically included the injunction that game protection was to continue. One doubts that this clause would have been included if the spread of nagana was considered to be contingent upon the existence of the game.

The Department of Lands took no immediate steps to attract settlers to the Pongola area and it was still lonely and out-of-the-way in 1926. But development of the region began then with the construction of the railway line between Zululand and Swaziland. There was so much big game in the area that during the course of construction a special police post was established in the old game reserve to protect it from being shot by the railway workers. Even thereafter, game remained plentiful and regular hunting parties visited nearby privately-owned farms there until well into the 1930s.³⁴

The region of which the former game reserve forms part never became an economic success in modern terms. After its transfer to the central government, settlers did not rush to move in.³⁵ After the depression, in 1935, in order to attract anyone at all, the government inaugurated the Pongola Irrigation Settlement, a scheme designed to entice about 250 farmers. However, malaria was rife and married people considered it dangerous to live there, so young, unmarried, probation farmers were substituted. They were to be taught the rudiments of farming and thereafter be allocated about 30 ha of irrigated land of their own. Despite huge government investments in irrigation engineering, equipment, buildings, stock and wages (including in 1938 a "veldwagter" to supervise the "police boys" and game preservation) the experiment was unsuccessful and abandoned in 1942.³⁶ Later the

controversial Josini Dam was built, considered by some to be an hydrological failure. In addition it is proposed that the lowland territories of the former chiefs Sambana and Umbigiza, Ingwavuma, be transferred to Swaziland and a major factor is once again the potential of Kosi Bay as a viable harbour for a land-locked country. Nearly a century has passed since access to the coast, the muddled boundaries and the imprecise political affiliations of the inhabitants were important issues. They remain contentious even today.

The role that conservation can play in politics has also not diminished in the course of time, and conservationists lobby to retain Ingwavuma within the Republic of South Africa on the basis of its ecological importance. The same reasons were advanced for proclaiming the Pongola Game Reserve in 1889 and suggestions later to extend it. The reserve was declared because it was politically necessary for the Z.A.R. to do so. After the Angola-Boer War, with the British in control of all of South Africa, this purpose of the reserve collapsed and it became a burden to the administration. It had no genuine conservation value, being too small to comprise an ecosystem or even an intact habitat which could support large, stable animal populations; there was no rare, endemic species requiring special protection and money could not be spared from urgent conservation priorities to transform it into a game farm. It is perhaps unfortunate that the first proclaimed government game reserve should have met the ignoble fate of being ignored out of existence, in contrast with later reserves, the Sabi and Singwitsi, which, as the Kruger National Park, comprise possibly the greatest game reserve in the world.

SOURCE LIST AND REFERENCES

1. Earlier game reserves in southern Africa were more in the nature of royal hunting preserves, e.g. Shaka's and it would be stretching a point to refer to these as government reserves.
2. BIGALKE, R. 1966. South Africa's first game reserve. *Fauna and Flora* 17:13-18.
3. Transvaal Archives (T.A.) EVR 44: 5790583, 2.8.1889. The farms were Wildebeestdraai 164, Langkloof 165, Golle 166, Leeuwkraal 167, Nyawoshevel 168, Middelin 169 and Lebombospoort 170. These farms now fall into the HU registration district and their numbers have been changed. The circumstances leading up to the proclamation of the reserve will be fully explored in the wider study mentioned earlier.
4. FELGATE, W.S. and E.J. KRIGE (eds.). 1982. *The Tembe Thonga of Natal and Moçambique: an ecological approach*. Durban: Department of African Studies, University of Natal.
5. See for instance, GARSON, N.G. 1957. *The Swaziland question and a road to the sea 1887-1895*. Archives Year Book for South African History 1957 (2), Cape Town: Government Printer; and VAN ZYL, M.C. 1966. *Die uitbreiding van Britse gesag oor die Natalse noordgrensgebiede 1879-1897*. Archives Year Book for South African History 1966 (2), Cape Town: Government Printer. These are probably the two most

- comprehensive works on the subject and I have followed them for the outline of Z.A.R.-British relations at this time. Very useful for its analysis of the African people and the ethnic labels applied to them is HARRIES, P. 1983. History, ethnicity and the Ingwavuma land deal: the Zulu northern frontier in the 19th century. *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* VI: 1-27.
6. *Staats Courant* 13.6.1894; Justice of the Peace appointment 8.6.1894.
 7. VAN OORDT, G. A. 1980. *Striving and hoping to the bitter end: the life of Herman Frederik Van Oordt 1862-1907*. Cape Town: G.A. Van Oordt. The end of Van Oordt's life was indeed a bitter one. After the Anglo-Boer War he attempted to make a living by trading in the northern Cape and South West Africa. Deserted by his wife and children, he drank heavily and died alone and in great poverty.
 8. As it is the editorial policy of *Koedoe* to economize on footnotes, I am unable to refer to specific pages and documents as is customary. Only the archive, archival group, volume and file number is consequently given. T.A. SS 2031 R8009/89.
 9. T.A. SS 1875 R3068/89.
 10. T.A. SS 3733 R5283/93. This was Wildebeestdraai 164, leased by C.J. Tosen.
 11. VAN OORDT, G.A. 1980. *Op cit.* p. 178
 12. T.A. SS 4905 R7441/95.
 13. T.A. SNA 189 NA3228/03.
 14. Three of Van Oordt's reports can be found in T.A. SS2031 R8009/89 and the other in T.A. SS 7606 R16403/98.
 15. T.A. SS 5304 R3190/96.
 16. T.A. SS 4975a R8748/95.
 17. T.A. SNA 70 NA2429/02; T.A. CS 1916/03.
 18. Transvaal Administration, *Executive Council Minutes*, II: res. 302, 21.4.03; p.88.
 19. T.A. LTG 65 73/5.
 20. K.N.P. Archives. Opsienersjaarverslae I.
 21. STEVENSON-HAMILTON, J. 1952. *South African Eden: from Sabi Game Reserve to Kruger National Park*. London: Cassell.
 22. T.A. SNA 189 NA3226/03; NA3227/03; NA3228/03.
 23. T.A. SNA 194 NA245/04.
 24. T.A. SNA 216 NA880/04.
 25. Transvaal Administration, *Annual report of the government game reserves 1903-4*. (Annexure O of Transvaal Administration Report, Native Affairs).
 26. T.A. SNA 216 NA880/04.
 27. T.A. SNA 221 NA1187/04.
 28. T.A. TPS TA2/3037. Except where indicated the information which follows is taken from this file series.
 29. Swaziland Proclamation 7 of 1905.
 30. T.A. SNA 277 NA 1839/05.
 31. T.A. LD 1718 745/09; LD 1985.
 32. Proclamation 1 of 1921.
 33. For conclusions on the nagana question see:
CURSON, H.H. and HUGO, J.M. 1924. Preservation of game in South

- Africa. *South African Journal of Science* XXI: 400-424; BIGALKE, R. 1966. *Op cit.*: PRINGLE, J.A. 1982. *The conservationists and the killers*. Cape Town: T.V. Bulpin; MILSTEIN, P. le S. 1984. Pongola: 'n onverklaarbare grensbesluit. *African Wildlife* 38(3):110-116.
34. Central Archives Depot (C.A.) LDE 299 8; JUS 3/1134/26.
 35. Only one farm had been taken up by 1928; Gollel 166 by C.S. Winter. Deeds Office, Farm Book.
 36. C.A. LDE 1505 29889/66; 29889/71/1 and other files in series 29889.