



Stunted cattle and goats even drive the camels from North Horr's waterhole.

Photo: A. Matheson

## What Happened to the Big-game in Northern Kenya?

### A SURVEY IN GABBRA COUNTRY

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HEAT rises off the cracked, salt-encrusted plains. Small, dispersed herds of dust-devils move along at a leisurely, slightly erratic pace away in the distance, over the barren flats.

In the middle of the Chalbi Desert, standing on the bonnet of my Land Rover, I can see only a dual line of tracks leading to the horizon in front and behind of me. There is not a single tree, bush, rock or gully to interrupt the absolutely flat carpet of dull, brown earth unwinding into the distance. There is not a cloud in the pale-blue sky, and a tremendous wind blows incessantly out of the South-East, heading for Lake Turkana, about 100 kilometres away.

The monotony and sense of infinite distance are broken by glances to either side, where the Chalbi is bounded on the East by a perpendicular wall of lava, marking the abrupt end of the volcanic rock strewn plain between the desert and the Huri Hills. These pyramid-shaped peaks are etched against the Eastern horizon, near the Ethiopian border. In places below the lava escarpment are bright green lines or clusters of doum palms, indicating subterranean water accumulations from run-off that comes from Mt. Kulal and the Chari Ashi hills to the west. Mt. Kulal, approximately 30 kms to the south-west, rises about 1,800 metres above the Chalbi, itself between 400 and 500 metres above sea level. The mountain is often veiled by a grey mist of wind borne grit, but on clear days it can be seen forming a massive north-south barrier between the Chalbi and the Southern end of Lake Turkana.

Further north, the Chalbi takes a swing to the East around the Northern end of the Chari Ashi Hills, and then one reaches North Horr, a motley scattering of Gabbra huts, dukas, government administration buildings (some abandoned), a Police post and a Catholic mission. North Horr marks the northern extent of the Chalbi, but the flats continue for a few kilometres to the East, where they begin to interfinger with vegetation and sediments layed down by erosion from higher land to the East.

The land around the Chalbi is made up mainly of volcanic plains, sand dunes, and old lake deposits. The vegetation is sparse, except on the eastern flanks of the Chari Ashi, along stream courses or, in the artesian-fed oases. The rest of the land is dominated by annual grasses and *Acacia*, though there are a variety of localized vegetation zones due to different soils, hydrology and altitude.

The Chalbi forms a natural drainage basin for an area covering almost 37,000 sq. kms, a quarter of which lies within Ethiopia. In this general area the Gabbra live today. They are primarily camel pastoralists, the most nomadic of any of the Kenyan pastoral groups because of the marginal nature of the environment in which they live. Part of the Borana group of Galla peoples, the Gabbra speak essentially the same language as their cattle-keeping Boran brethren, who live to the east and south towards Moyale, Marsabit, and Isiolo.

The Chalbi today is a dry, flat expanse of salt-encrusted earth, occasionally flooded after the rains. In the past it was a permanent lake, covering a considerably larger area than the present flats indicate, and old lake beds can be found several kilometres from the present 'shore line' and at least 30 metres above it. There is also good evidence that Lake Turkana and other East African lakes were considerably larger at various times in the past than they are today, but that is another story.

#### Pastoral societies

My work in the Chalbi area since August, 1979, has been investigating the prehistory and paleo-environmental conditions connected with the introduction of pastoralism into Northern Kenya and how present-day pastoral societies function. I have been working mainly with the Gabbra, the principal group inhabiting the study area, and they probably represent one of the most traditional pastoral systems still operating in East Africa.

One of the main objectives of the research project is to try and determine the impact of a pastoral economy on the ecology and environment of Northern Kenya since its inception in the area perhaps 5,000 years, ago, and together with an understanding of how pastoralists are utilizing their environmental resources today, come up with ideas of how best to plan for the future.

Wildlife is an important part of any grazing land eco-system and non-domestic animals were, until fairly recently, a significant component in

the economic and social life of pastoralists in Northern Kenya. Wildlife, particularly the larger herbivores, are now rare or extinct in many parts of Northern Kenya, where they used to be common. Archaeological evidence from sites east of Lake Turkana shows that from over two million years ago to relatively recent times the area supported a typical savannah fauna, including elephant, rhino, giraffe, buffalo, and a wide range of antelopes, gazelles, and carnivores. To support such a fauna, the vegetation must have been richer than it is today.

In 1888 Von Hohnel, accompanying Count Teleki, the man who named Lake Rudolf (now Turkana), described wildlife encountered from the Southern to the Northern end of the lake along the Eastern margin. To anyone who knows that area today, the numbers and kinds of animals met with by Teleki's expedition seem incredible. There were numerous herds of elephants. Rhino seemed to be charging them from behind every bush, and herds of buffalo of up to two or three hundred animals were sighted coming down to drink from the lake.

### K.R.E.M.U. Survey

Today there is not a single elephant, buffalo, or giraffe between the Chalbi and Lake Turkana. There may be a rhino or two still left in the area, but a Kenya Rangeland Ecological Monitoring Unit aerial survey done in 1978 estimated zero for the entire Eastern side of the lake and interior. The oldest elders of the Dassenech, who live at the North Eastern end of the lake, have never seen an elephant in their lives. There are still oryx, topi, zebra, Grant's gazelle, and gerenuk in the area, but why have the larger animals disappeared?

There is no simple answer to the question, but it most likely involves a combination of different kinds of human hunting activities over the past century and environmental changes. It we take as our starting point 1888, the first European description of the area east of Lake Turkana, it is clear that the land supported abundant wildlife. The indigenous population at that time consisted of a few El Molo settlements on the lake or lake shore and the Samburu and Rendille inland.

The Samburu had been pushed north by pressure from the Laikipiak Maasai and by 1850 they were watering their cattle in Chew Bahir (Lake Stefanie), which contained water at that time. Today it is like the Chalbi, dry, desolate salt flats. The Samburu occupied the higher areas suitable for cattle, while the Rendille, having mainly camels, grazed over the lower, drier areas. Together they ranged over an immense area from the North-west corner of the Chew Bahir, South-west to the Mt. Nyiro area, where they would be raided by the Laikipiak and Turkana, and to the east past Marsabit, at one time as far as Wajir. The Samburu lived on friendly terms with the Rendille, because there was very little competition between them, and as allies they stood a better chance against enemies.

### Samburu and Rendille

The Samburu as a rule do not hunt, except to protect their herds, and the Rendille do not hunt to any great extent, thus wildlife over this vast area was not endangered. Beginning in the 1880s, a chain of events occurred which I think largely explains the extinction of elephant, giraffe, and buffalo and the drastic reduction of rhino leading to the recent disappearance of this animal from large areas of Marsabit District.



*Digging below the salt-encrusted surface of the Chalbi Desert for clues to the past. Pollen samples from this pit enabled old vegetation patterns to be reconstructed.*

The following are extracts from comments written by colonial administrators for Northern Kenya, and they tell something of the story wildlife:

- 1916— Game plentiful around Kalacha and signs of buffalo.
- 1921— Kulal area—Ethiopians have almost cleared the area of elephants; survivors found in South Horr valley and Ndoto Mountains.
- 1922— Kulal to North Horr — extensive hunting parties from Ethiopia, 'their destruction amongst the game in the last few years has been tremendous. Herds of elephants have been wiped out and places where rhinoceros were in plenty, are now only remarkable for the complete absence of these beasts.'
- 1928— Marsabit District—rinderpest has 'decimated buffalo, and greater kudu in district. A five-year prohibition on hunting was recommended as giraffe and young elephants were dying of an unknown disease.
- 1929— Moyale area—still a few small elephant and rhinos around. Giraffe still plentiful, but many killed each year.
- 1933— Moyale—'very little' game left in the district; elephant, rhino, and buffalo now extinct. A very serious drought hit the north and many animals died.
- 1935— Marsabit District—a 'big toll' of giraffe taken every year
- 1941— Marsabit District—the Army is shooting game in the district indiscriminately; one officer shot seven giraffe.
- 1948— Kulal is 'depressingly' devoid of big game' and Marsabit District does not carry half the game it should, because of war-time losses.
- 1952— Moyale District—Ethiopia continues to be a ready market for rhino horn, ivory and leopard skin.
- 1953— Moyale District—the game in the district is so small it can no longer be considered as a source of supply.

In the late 1880s, bovine pleuro-pneumonia and rinderpest swept through East Africa, decimating herds of cattle. The Samburu were particularly hard hit and those people with any cattle left at all retired south to the highlands of Mts. Kulal, Nyiro, and the Ndotos. The Laikipiak Maasai had been defeated and dispersed a few years earlier by war, thus movement to the South was possible. Most others became *Dorobo*; that is they turned to hunting and gathering for survival. There was a large influx of destitute Samburu into El Molo settlements on Lake Turkana, and it was at this time that the El Molo began to speak Samburu and adopt Samburu customs, such as age sets.

The Gabbra and Boran to the North-east were extremely hard hit as well. One of the easiest ways to begin rebuilding herds was to trade ivory and rhino horn to the Somali in exchange for small stock and sometimes cattle. One good pair of tusks would fetch 30 cows. A main trading entrepot was at Lugh, in Somalia, where ivory could be taken down the Juba River to Kismayu, or taken overland to the port of Brava to be shipped overseas. There are Gabbra today who can point to animals that are 'elephant' cattle — descendants of cows bought with tusks.

Thus, during the late 1880s and 1890s hunting of elephant and rhino began on a large scale, mainly as a strategy to rebuild herds. I think it quite likely that buffalo in the area were very hard hit at this time also, both as a source of food and because they are very susceptible to cattle diseases. During this same period a trade route was opened up by Swahilis from Mombasa that went to Moyale via Meru and Marsabit.

Then in 1896 and 1897 Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia began sending his armies South into Borana to expand his empire and in search of cattle. The Amhara and Tigre herds had been greatly reduced by the rinderpest epizootic and Borana was supposed to be rich in cattle. This Ethiopian incursion began to force Gabbra and Boran South into the old Northern Frontier District of Kenya and then westwards, due to Somali pressure. The area east of Lake Turkana was basically uninhabited at this time, except near the lake. Lord Delamere in 1897, coming from the Somali coast, marched for 16 days from Dukana, near the Kenya-Ethiopia border, to Koronli, on the South-east margin of the Chalbi, without seeing a single settlement. Today this area is the heartland of the Gabbra.

The early 20th Century was a time of instability in Northern Kenya, as Gabbra and Boran were flooding into Northern Kenya and Ethiopian Army patrols were raiding them. It was during this time that hunting with rifles began on a large scale, and the effects on game must have been disastrous.

The Galla are not like the Maasai and Samburu in their attitudes about hunting. They will hunt for food, profit, and for cultural reasons. To kill a fierce animal such as an elephant, rhino, buffalo, or lion is to attract respect from people and to prove manhood. If the tusks, horn, or hide can then be sold—all the better.





*A trio of camels silhouetted on a ridge in Gabbra territory.*

*Wells, usually dug deep into the parched earth, yield precious water for livestock.*

*(Photographs on these pages by the author)*

In 1916 buffalo were around Kalacha, today a settlement located on the Eastern margin of the Chalbi. Buffalo could not survive in that area today, as there is not enough grass, due to overgrazing by the Gabbra.

I think it quite possible that due to heavy deforestation of mainly *Acacia* stands, the wood being used for boma construction and firewood, and heavy grazing by camels, cattle and sheep and goats since the end of the 19th Century by ever-increasing numbers of Gabbra and Boran, many areas are no longer suited to elephant, buffalo and giraffe as they used to be. It is a reasonable hypothesis that average annual rainfall has decreased as a result of this reduction of ground cover, though this has not been proved.

Gabbra that I have interviewed recognize that areas with trees have diminished significantly during their life times. Today, they practice a form of conservation by having a traditional law against felling of *dadach* trees (*Acacia tortillis*), but in preferred occupation areas it is common to see these trees with many of the branches cut off.

It is this reduction in tree cover in the northern part of Marsabit District that is the principal cause of the disappearance of giraffe, though hunting has contributed to their demise. The Gabbra and Boran have many uses for giraffe products, particularly the skin over the stomach area. From this skin (*yabu*) they manufacture a kind of bucket, called *okhole*, which they use in milking cows and goats and for taking earth and then water from wells. New *okhole* have to come either from the far North or South of Gabbra-land today there are no more giraffes left in the main area.

Through a combination of hunting, disease, and environmental degradation since the turn of the century large herbivores have disappeared from big areas of Northern Kenya where they were once abundant. Although data is scanty, it is almost certain that antelope, gazelle, and zebra have also diminished considerably in the region, due primarily to causes related to competition with domestic livestock. Even though hunting is now illegal, the carrying capacity of the land is limited and wildlife face a challenge for survival from diminishing resources.

Through continuing environmental degradation—desertification—overall vegetation productivity will continue to decline. The next extended drought or series of droughts, an inevitability, might just very well finish off what is left of the sparse vegetation to the East, North and West of the Chalbi as the domestic animals in the area (the wild ones have more freedom to migrate) scour the land before succumbing to thirst and starvation. It is time for action to be taken to reduce human and animal pressures on very limited environmental resources.

