From Hunters to Stewards:
Origins of the Conservation Mentality
in the Literature of British Imperialism

British Hunter with a dead lion assisted by local tribesmen. (Photo by A. Bayley-Worthington/Todd/Getty Images). Circa 1890.

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I. Introduction

Ever since Gutenberg, works about travel and exploration have been among the bestsellers of the book trade. Historians have long recognized that best-selling books can provide useful evidence about popular mentalities in particular eras. Over the past century, a new kind of popular bestseller has emerged: books that offer not only narratives of travel and exploration, but also accounts of the interaction between travelers or settlers and the natural world. The literature of British Imperialism in particular reflects this increasing preoccupation with the theme of human/animal interaction. Moreover, this change coincides with a phenomenon that we might call the feminization of the literature of empire. Increasingly, the best-selling books from the far corners of the British Empire were written not by the male big game hunters who dominated previous periods, but by women whose ethos encompassed respect for the natural world, empathy for animals, and awareness of nature’s fragility. Women’s writing about the natural world tends to mix nature with nurture, and to see animals not as targets of conquest, but rather as creatures to be cherished, learned from and preserved. The following essay charts this trajectory from conquest to nurture by examining three key best-selling works from the literature of the British Empire: Trader Horn, The Flame Trees of Thika, and Born Free.

The shift in the British perspective from exploitation to the conservation of charismatic megafauna in Africa shows an increase in environmental awareness and the need for the preservation of these species. Alfred Aloysius Horn’s memoir Trader Horn, published in 1927, exposes the attitudes toward hunting and exploration during his adventures in Africa around the turn of the 20th century. British literature at this time was overwhelmingly masculine—written by men, for men—and the hero was "the great white hunter." The first evidence of this
feminization occurs with Elspeth Huxley’s memoir, *The Flame Trees of Thika*, which appeared in 1959 and presents a more environmentally sensitive perspective about big game and conservation. She intimately describes her experiences growing up in East Africa in the 1910s and her compassion toward Africa’s big game animals. Her sentiments are shared by the native people she encounters, and are decidedly ignored by her family’s neighboring British plantation owners. Finally, Joy Adamson’s bestselling memoir of 1960, *Born Free*, demonstrates the third and most influential shift toward the conservation of big game. Joy and George Adamson’s commitment to the successful care and release of their beloved lioness Elsa transformed the public’s perception of big game animals, especially lions, presenting them as sentient creatures worthy of research and protection, rather than as targets for hunting expeditions and trophies.

While these three authors lived and published their books only a generation or so apart, their experiences with the environment, British expansion and exploration, and the treatment of African big game are decidedly different. Contemporary authors John M. MacKenzie and Mark Cioc provide a detailed background for the history of hunting and conservation in Africa in *The Empire of Nature* and *The Game of Conservation*, respectively. MacKenzie and Cioc seamlessly blend ecology, history and big game hunting to offer a distinctive perspective on our interaction with the environment. Harriet Ritvo also discusses big game hunting in the Victorian Empire in her pioneering article “Destroyers and Preservers” and in subsequent books on British attitudes toward animals. These works will supply the historical context for the literary investigation of British imperialism attempted here. Within that context, the best-selling books by Horn, Huxley, and Adamson suggest significant shifts in the treatment of big game hunting in literature. Their popularity as bestsellers and their subsequent portrayal on film indicate that these works reflect the popular sentiments of the times and their importance for environmental history.
II. Background of Big Game Hunting in Africa

For much of our history, humans have hunted animals as an essential aspect of their survival. Whether for food or in self-defense, migratory people only hunted what they needed. They used every part of the animal and the value of the animal’s life and the nourishment it provided was recognized and sometimes worshiped. They did not have the luxury of killing animals and consuming only the most desirable parts. It is only recently in our history that our relationship with these hunted animals changed. Colonists targeted animals such as leopards and rhinoceroses and hunted selectively for their skins, or horns, leaving the rest of the animal to waste. Driven by the abundance phenomenon, British Imperialists saw thousands of exotic animals roaming the wild lands of Africa, and viewed them as an inexhaustible resource available for the pleasure of the "great white hunter." Only societies that have surpluses can exploit their resources in this way.

The tracking and hunting of big game was one of the most prominent and devastating examples of how British expansionists asserted their dominance over their newly acquired territories. Most people in United Kingdom had only heard stories of the great African plains and the “strange and wild animals” that inhabited this foreign land (MacKenzie, 40). For British imperialists, Africa presented an opportunity to tame an unruly land and exploit the labor of its “uncivilized” people. The exotic nature of elephants, zebras, lions and rhinoceroses spurred the desire and demand for fur and ivory products in international trade markets. Furs for clothing, hats, and rugs were luxury items for British elites and royalty and were easily incorporated into the lavish lifestyles of the wealthy. Environmental historian Mark Cioc suggests that “behind the killing frenzy in Africa was the enormously lucrative trade in ivory, skins and feathers with ivory commerce alone accounting for most of the profit” (Cioc, 4). Furthermore, John Mackenzie
addresses the distinct difference between hunting for food and hunting for profit as one of the first shifts in the use and then exploitation of these animals. Hunting for food was primarily done by African natives who had not yet been influenced by trade markets for these items, while hunting for profit was done to increase the wealth and status of already elite British explorers.

Hunting was a central part of the imperial culture and was designed exclusively for the masculine elite. It reinforced the themes of masculinity, aggression, and dominance over the environment—all attributes desired by the elite. Lower social classes were intended to look on in envy at the power of this class of people. Not only were these elite men able to outfit a hunting party with expensive rifles and gear, but also they were able to track wild and untamed animals and kill them for pleasure. Harriet Ritvo states that “wild animals represented the obstacles that had hitherto prevented colonial territories from joining the march of progress and [that] had to be eliminated before their native territories could enjoy the blessings of European civilisation” (Ritvo, 6). These habits also fueled the passion for the display of animal trophies. The most avid big game hunters had vast collections of skins and horns from previous hunting expeditions, which became popular items to display for guests. As MacKenzie notes, Britain was not widely exposed to rare cheetah or tiger skins until 1851 at the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace:

It should perhaps be remembered that many of the animals being presented in this way were generally new. New species of large mammals continued to be ‘discovered’ up to at least the First World War, and the representations of many known ones were discovered to be inaccurate by nineteenth-century travellers (MacKenzie, 29).

The exposure to these items greatly increased the appeal of this unexplored land to many of the British elite and the numbers of people interested in traveling to Africa to hunt surged between 1880 and 1910. While early and select hunting parties had a relatively small impact on the
population size of big game animals, the increased popularity of this sport drastically reduced the populations of these species.

The desire to hunt big game spread to other locations around the world, including the United States. As more people visited the wild lands of Africa, hunting big game was used as propaganda to promote the domination of the environment by “civilized” humans. United States President Theodore Roosevelt was well known for his passion for hunting and his famous photograph next to an enormous bull elephant in 1909 (Photo 1), became an iconic image. He embarked on a year-long safari hunt in British East Africa in which he collected over 1,000 specimens including 17 lions, 11 elephants and 20 rhinoceros (MacKenzie, 156). This safari was described as a mission to “collect” specimens for the Smithsonian Institution, but it is clear that Roosevelt intended to “shoot and kill” the animals, and found the experience quite pleasurable. For hunters, political figures and the elite around the world, dominance over the animals meant domination of the land and ultimately of its people.

III. *Trader Horn: Hunting Expeditions in Equatorial Africa*

Alfred Aloysius Horn was born in England in 1861 and was sent to West Africa at the age of seventeen to work at a British trading company (Horn, xi). The company purchased items from other locations in Africa and exchanged them for ivory and rubber, two very sought-after items in United Kingdom and throughout Europe. Horn mainly traveled from tribe to tribe using the rivers as his most common mode of transportation. His book was written many years after his journeys in Africa, with the help of Ethelreda Lewis, an acquaintance he made in his later years once he returned to England. The book was published in 1927, only four years before his
death, and was instantly popular, becoming the third-ranking non-fiction bestseller in 1928 (Eagan, 224).

Horn’s book is a recounting of his expeditions in British East Africa and West Africa along the Ivory Coast. He was a big game hunter accompanied by a party of up to fifteen guides, trackers, and fellow hunters. While he shot many different kinds of animals depending on their demand abroad, his big game animal of choice was the elephant. Not only was it sought after by many hunters because it was the largest of the big game in Africa, but also the ivory tusks were expensive luxury items easily sold in international markets. Ivory became a profitable item for Horn to sell, which reinforced his desire for big game hunting. Interestingly, he laments the fact that he had so many initial expenditures to fund the numerous hunts: “Each tusk represented so many flint-locked guns and so much gunpowder and so many bags of salt,” but it is clear that the chase and effort, in addition to the final monetary reward, drove big game hunters to keep up their businesses—hunting was pleasurable, profitable, and dangerous (Horn, 14). It is this danger that Horn underscores throughout this book, which makes the risk of the battle with the animals all that more thrilling. This is just what men were seeking to read about at the time, and Trader Horn provided them an opportunity to experience vicariously what only the wealthy could afford, or the adventurer could embark on.

The majority of Trader Horn is based on his exciting hunts and the interactions he has with the native populations including the Kikuyu, Okellely, and Oshebas tribes. Horn’s treatment of animals evolves throughout the book, and there are some indications of remorse for the slaughter he inflicted on them. Ultimately, however, the modern reader will be struck by his lack of recognition of his own impact on these animals. While in Angola, Horn and his party
encounter a colony of pelicans in nesting and hatching season. He observes them in great detail, and even anthropomorphizes some of their features:

Father pelican is very good to his wife, and there was a continual procession to and fro of these huge birds. They are great fishers, and carry their catch in a yellow skin pouch which, when loaded, hands like a bag under their bill. I shot four of these birds. Their breast tastes like chicken. The fish they carried in their pouches looked like salmon trout. Thus for dinner, we had fish, flesh, and foul (Horn, 37).

Giving these birds human traits, and then explaining how he consumed them, is unexpected and off-putting. His description doesn’t support his previous observations of these majestic birds. Horn discusses the beauty of his surroundings, attributes human features to the four birds he describes, and then shoots and eats them. It is possible he does this to distance himself from the impact he knows he has on the birds and their “family,” but oddly, the anthropomorphism of the birds brings them emotionally closer to Horn. His narrative exposes contradictions in this respect, and may reveal his conflicted feelings about hunting in Africa. Ultimately, Horn recognizes that he has to provide food for his party and himself, whatever the cost is to nature.

Horn provides a similar example of brutality in his description of the famous elephant drive near the M’pangwes' village. Once a year, Horn helped this village lure a herd of approximately 150 elephants into an enclosure several miles in circumference. “Once in the enclosure, the trapped animals have no chance of escape, as the hunters—in force—close round and form a ring, which is seldom broken” (Horn 84). Once the ring is secured, the killing frenzy begins. Horn watched from the side as the entire herd of elephants was decimated by hundreds of guns and spears. The killing took hours and Horn remarked that “[he] decided to return home and ... left this motley crowd of savages” (Horn, 87). It seems as though Horn makes a clear distinction between this sort of killing, and the sort of killing he does, which again contradicts his
earlier feelings and the pride he took in big game hunting. While he might distinguish the M’pangwes’ habits from his own, a major difference is that the M’pangwes killed their yearly supply of elephants for ivory and meat in a single hunt, thus potentially eliminating several complete herds of elephants. Horn traveled year round and killed elephants selectively from many different regions of Africa. While both Horn and the M’pangwes ultimately killed around the same total number of elephants, Horn viewed the two strategies in very different ways. For Horn, wherever his party encountered an elephant, they killed it, whether they had fulfilled their quota or not, but they did not kill hundreds of elephants at once.

There is only one instance where Horn expresses remorse for the hunting he does, and he mentions it twice in his book. Early on in his safari, he encountered a gorilla sitting amongst plantain leaves. He took the clear shot and the gorilla was instantly killed. When he approached it, he found it was a female with a young gorilla attached to its arm. Reflecting back on the experience, Horn says, “I felt great sorrow at this sight and made a resolution I would never shoot another of these animals with their babies, it looked too much like murder” (Horn, 66). Somehow, Horn made a connection with this particular gorilla, possibly because these animals are more closely related to humans than other species, or possibly because he realized in this instance the pleasure he received from killing these animals was outweighed by the guilt he felt when he made this devastating mistake. It is possible that Trader Horn may have had more compassion toward the African wildlife than he intended to convey in his narrative, and had difficulty confronting the impact of his actions. This interaction made a great impact on Horn because he mentions it again forty or so pages later when he reflects on the bond between mother and child.

Taking the infants from the mother? Hard enough, I admit, but the mother can get another child. No child can replace a
fond mother. Only once I shot a mother—I think I’ve mentioned it. When she was dying she lifted her hand and put it on the baby. She—lifted her hand... I tried to make amends to outraged Nature. I gave the little one to one of the traders to bring up for me...meaning to let it loose when it was old enough—paying my debt to that poor mother that asked for pity. But it died in captivity (Horn, 107).

This shows a distinct change in Horn's view of his treatment of animals. He has continued to reflect on his impact on the gorilla and its baby, and clearly, in this instance, the pleasure of hunting did not outweigh the remorse he felt afterward. He clearly humanized the gorilla because of its physical similarity to humans and its death had a subtle yet lasting effect on him.

Toward the end of his book, Horn identifies the clash and competition between humans and animals for land—the driving characteristic of the British Empire. Elephants and gorillas were “also numerous and destructive” and posed threats to the success of newly established coffee plantations (Horn, 125). These animals were readily hunted and were considered pests. Leopards also frequently “infested” the islands along the Ivory Coast. In Horn’s words, “Many of these were man-eaters and were more dangerous than lions” (Horn, 55). Horn was frequently enlisted in tracking and killing these animals for the benefit of the growing native populations and English colonists alike. The regional overlap between humans and animals and the expansion of the British Empire fueled the competition for land and territory between these two groups. The African natives and the colonists were both encroaching on the natural habitats of big game, which resulted in further disputes about the allocation of natural resources.

Lastly, Horn demonstrates a continued lack of recognition that his actions were detrimental to the various species of big game. Horn, and hunters like him who continuously took more from nature than was needed for their own survival, pushed many species to the brink of extinction:
When man has destroyed nature, then it’s his turn to go. ‘Tis a lucky thing the cannibal tribes have kept the elephants safe so long from these so-called big game hunters. An equatorial gang of cut-throats, wasting wildlife to make what they call a bag. While the cannibals are there, there’ll be no lack of elephants... They’d never be so childish as these dukes and colonels who have to count the head they kill same as we counted our marbles in Lancashire (Horn, 143).

Horn subconsciously separates himself from the big game hunters he describes here. He never viewed his hunting as a means to provide the dukes and colonels with the African items he criticizes, and hunts primarily for the thrill of this lucrative business.

Ultimately Horn demonstrates that his attitudes toward his own treatment of animals changed during his adventures in equatorial Africa. After spending so many years “out in the bush” as he termed it, he finally returned to England a changed man. He spent the remainder of his years as a door-to-door salesman of household kitchen appliances, not engaged at all with hunting or wildlife. It is by chance he met Ethelreda Lewis, who helped him write and share his experiences in Africa with the world though his book.

Based on its initial literary popularity, Trader Horn was made into a film that was released in 1931. The visual impact of the film provided the audiences with powerful imagery that enhanced the savage and aggressive behavior of the animals. The film shows hundreds of large animals roaming the wild African landscape, which supported the assumption of abundance that the imperialists took for granted. A film review published in The Spectator in London on March 28, 1931 describes the release of Trader Horn as a “competent and thrilling enough piece of work” with the roving lions and “leopards fighting baboons [and] crocodiles wallowing in the rivers” (H.M., 499). Film critics from the day encouraged the public to see the film immediately.

The auditory impact of the film's sound track was equally impressive: The New York Times on February 4, 1931, stated that “thrilling realism is spliced cleverly with rugged
fiction...for not only were the wild beasts perceived in their full fierceness, but their cries and
growls and roars were heard from the screen as they [had] never been before...” Sound tracks
were of course relatively new in 1931, and *Trader Horn* rich pandemonium of animal
vocalizations made a powerful impression on critics and audiences alike. The overall effect,
however, was to distance them from these "savage" creatures, rather than to close the gap
between humans and animals. Sure Trader Horn was doing the people of Africa a great service
by eliminating so many creatures capable of making those horrible sounds!

IV. *The Flame Trees of Thika*: Treatment of Animals and the Environment

Elspeth Huxley was born in England in 1907 and from the age of five onwards, she lived
in Thika in British East Africa, known today as Kenya, on the land her parents had purchased for
a coffee plantation (Huxley, i). As colonial settlers, they were completely unprepared for the
rugged and exposed landscape they planned to settle. They brought with them phonographs, an
accordion and other cumbersome items that helped them in no way to survive in their new
environment. They were unfamiliar with rugged life in Africa and were unwilling to
compromise their comfort and social values and standing in British society. Investing in
plantations in Africa had become quite popular in the early 20th century and drew many elite
members of society from England, so the Huxleys were not alone in this endeavor. However,
their success in this foreign land depended on the labor of African tribes who were looking for
employment and trade items from the naive British settlers.

Big game hunting was an extremely popular sport, which many British colonists
continued to participate in throughout Huxley’s childhood. Huxley mentions several instances in
which events similar to those described in *Trader Horn* took place near their plantation. The
difference, however, is how Huxley herself exhibits changing attitudes toward nature. Huxley’s memoir is an example of female literature in an imperialist framework which successfully popularized empathy for the natural world. She initiates this shift of ethos by presenting her experiences with fascination and excitement and providing detailed scientific descriptions of her many encounters with African wildlife. When shown a chameleon for example, she expresses a profusion of wonder and admiration:

Indeed these creatures with their air of patient, knowing, and obstinate complacency fascinated me. I admired the way they swiveled their deep and watchful eyes in big, baggy purple sockets that enabled them to see in any direction they pleased, and loved to feel the dry, cold burr-like pluck of their agile little fingers on my flesh, and to observe them sway backwards and forwards, like a man about to take a tremendous leap, when they contemplated a sudden, darting, forward waddle (Huxley, 45).

Just as Horn described the pelicans, Huxley anthropomorphizes the chameleon: he is like a man uncertain of his next step. Whereas Horn’s instinct is to shoot and kill, hers is to describe and admire the chameleon like a friend rather than just another animal in nature. Similarly, Huxley makes this connection again when she takes care of an injured duiker (Photo 2). It becomes a pet to her, which further changes her perspective on nature. Huxley’s actions suggest that her compassion and empathy for the animals around her was intensified by their need for protection from less empathetic beings.

When family friends visited the Huxleys on their new land in Thika, the topic of hunting as a sport arose in their weekend conversation. Huxley notes that “although Tilly and Robin [her parents] then believed as firmly as their friends did that to shoot animals was one of life’s richest pleasures,” she did not believe it was how they would often choose to spend their time (Huxley, 45-46). This conversation prompted further questions about what Huxley’s parents intended to do with their fortune once the coffee plantation began to produce. Robin, her father, replied that
“he meant to buy the most expensive luxury in the world” (Huxley 45). To Trader Horn, this would have been the largest gorilla skull or heaviest elephant tusk, and Robin’s guests thought along the same lines and mentioned shooting tigers as something they would choose to spend their fortune on. Robin’s response was, however, completely unexpected. He plainly said, “doing absolutely nothing” which prompted many surprised responses. While Robin’s answer could have been simply a personal choice, the fact that a British colonist, owner of a coffee plantation, would rather do nothing than hunt the big game so many colonists came to kill, suggests a decidedly different attitude toward animals. It is possible that Robin satisfied his domination of the African landscape through the maintenance of his plantation. Huxley describes the many battles fought against the swiftly growing grasses and sudden downpours so common in East Africa. She also describes the many failed attempts of her parents to assert their power over nature. Somehow, no matter how many weeds they pulled, they always grew back twice as thick and just as persistent as before.

Soil quality, soil erosion and agriculture is a topic Huxley studied later on in her life at the Reading University when she returned to England. She noticed a different impact on the environment due to the presence of the British in Africa. The increasing numbers of adventurers interested in beginning their own coffee plantations drastically drained the soil of nutrients. This observation indicates another blatant difference between Huxley and Horn. Soil erosion is never mentioned in Trader Horn and is something Horn was probably never exposed to or didn’t think about. He had limited awareness of his impact on the landscape, let alone the quality and productivity of the soil. The only plantations he describes are the ones created by the native populations near their villages. While these were spread throughout Africa, the sort of seeds planted had been successfully grown and harvested there for centuries. It was the influx of
British imperialists and their intensive farming for profit in Africa that had widespread deleterious effects on the soil and the African environment. It was Huxley who began to notice these elements and the impact her parent’s plantation had on the soil and the surrounding ecosystems.

The final element in Huxley’s treatment of animals is seen in her relationship with the injured duiker she saved as a child. The duiker, whom she named Twinkle, became her responsibility. The duiker resembled a small antelope, and followed Huxley around the house, letting her groom it and feed it by hand. “The little duiker was a comfort, and let me stroke her warm body while she waggled a stumpy tail” (Huxley, 78). Huxley protected Twinkle from the dangers of the African outback and made her a house pet. When Huxley was older, she accompanied her parents on a hunting expedition with their Kikuyu assistants. They had tracked a duiker and had cornered it in a bush. The two Kikuyu sprinted after it, and ultimately killed it for supper. While the duiker was for their meal, the experience was traumatizing for Huxley. The animal, which they thought was a buck, was in fact a pregnant female. The hunters removed the unborn baby, and it “looked so tragic that [Huxley] burst into tears” (Huxley, 125). She witnessed an animal of the same species as her beloved Twinkle, hunted for food, but also for pleasure. As the Kikuyu hunters celebrate their successful hunt with a song, Huxley reflects:

Perhaps this song celebrated the death of the duiker and its unborn baby, and was its sole brief memorial. The singer no doubt made its death into a triumph for his skill in running, and for the marvels of the white man’s rifle. But the triumph seemed to me a very mean one, and it was a long time before I could forget the duiker that had been so peacefully browsing on the hillside, a nest perhaps prepared for its child, and was overtaken so roughly by the pain and terror of death (Huxley, 125).
It is clear that Huxley feels strongly about the death of this duiker, which is made more powerful because of her connection with her pet duiker at home. This experience is similar to the remorse Horn felt after killing the mother gorilla, and the impact it had on its baby. The fact that the duiker was killed for food, and not for trade or sale, does not change the overall impact of the hunt. It stood out to Huxley as one of the cruelest things a man can do to an animal, but it identifies an interesting connection between Horn and Huxley: both authors felt a greater sense of compassion toward an animal when it was killed with its young or family, than when it was killed on its own. The idea that a herd of elephants or a pride of lions is a family unit and could witness the death of one of its members is an emotional element both Horn and Huxley recognize. This may be anthropomorphism by both authors again, but it is widely known that elephants and lions have excellent memory and can mourn the loss of each other. In both instances, Horn and Huxley directly saw the consequences of their actions and the actions of others, on the animal.

Killing a lone animal, without the presence of its "family," allowed Horn to ignore the lasting impact of his hunting on the entire herd, and ultimately the population of that species. In contrast, Elspeth Huxley's orientation toward the natural world was from the beginning compounded of empathy and wonder, and beyond her naïve anthropomorphism one can sense in her memoir the sensibility of budding natural scientist, increasingly aware of the ecological complexity and fragility of the natural world.

V. *Born Free*: Shift from Exploitation to Compassion and Conservation

The story of Joy and George Adamson and their lioness Elsa illustrates the final shift in our relationship with the treatment of big game, and our desire to protect these vulnerable
animals. These elements further indicate the feminization of British Imperialist literature as they support the conservation, not the extermination, of these species. The Adamsons were stationed in the Northern Frontier Province of Kenya in 1956, where George served as the Senior Game Warden. He surveyed the territory on long safaris to enforce Game Laws, “prevent[ed] poaching and dealt with dangerous animals that ha[d] molested the tribesmen” (Adamson, 17). On one of these safaris, George was asked to track and kill a man-eating lion that had caused the death of several local Boran tribespeople. In this position, George is essentially following in the footsteps of Trader Horn. He is controlling landscape and its charismatic megafauna by tracking and killing the most aggressive animals. Joy accompanied him on most of his adventures to take photographs and otherwise document their travels, but rejected their overall role and impact on the environment.

As it happened, the Adamsons’ team set out and successfully located and killed the lion, only to discover an aggressive lioness who stalked and charged their caravan. They had no choice but to shoot her as well. Upon further investigation of the area, George discovered that the two lions were protecting a den of three newly born lion cubs, their eyes not yet open. Both Joy and George felt immediate remorse for their actions since the lions were simply protecting their cubs. Joy knew the cubs couldn’t be left to die. She was overcome by her compassion and decided to take them home. This was the start of an entirely new adventure for the Adamsons: the care and upbringing of wild lions had never been seriously considered by a Game Warden. Their effort and devotion to the cubs demonstrates their commitment for the wellbeing of these animals. By this one event, George’s role as Game Warden is dominated by Joy’s nurturing ethos.
Soon after adopting the cubs, the Adamsons realized they could not provide for all three of them (Photo 4). Once they reached a few months of age, they were taken to the Nairobi airport and sent to the London Zoo. While under different circumstances, Trader Horn acted similarly to the Adamsons when he shot the mother gorilla and orphaned her baby. It is telling that Horn never even considered caring for the gorilla himself. He thought it was enough that he saved it at all. Furthermore, a big game hunter saving a baby gorilla would not have been well received socially in early twentieth-century Britain: the nurturing of orphaned babies was not a masculine activity. Then, it was socially accepted that animals were intended for the pleasure of hunting, not for rescuing. The two options he considered were to leave it or to send it away, placing it in the care of someone else. Unlike Horn, Joy Adamson had grown so attached to the cubs, she convinced George to reconsider the fate of the smallest female. He agreed and they named her Elsa. This was the turning point. Joy’s nurturing attitude had overcome George’s masculine role and together they had fully committed themselves to raising the young lioness as a part of their family. Both Horn and the Adamsons regretted their actions, but only the Adamsons considered raising the orphaned animal themselves.

Now with only one cub, the Adamsons were able to devote much of their time to caring for Elsa. They exposed her to their surrounding environment, gave her rope and tire toys, played with her, and brought her on their safaris. Once full-grown, Elsa demanded even more of the Adamsons’ time and played with them more roughly than before. She also demonstrated more interest in exploring the African landscape and chased herds of elephants and gazelles, however always returning to the Adamsons for food. Shortly after this, George received notice that he and Joy had been requested to return to England, obviously without Elsa. Not knowing what to do, they pleaded for more time to train Elsa to survive on her own. Their appeal was granted, yet
the Adamsons faced their largest challenge yet—how to train Elsa to hunt on her own and successfully release her into the wild.

Like other British settlers, the Adamsons had no knowledge of how to train Elsa. She had been raised as a house pet, collar and all, and was provided for in every respect (Photo 5). George and Joy had to shift their mindset and began treating Elsa as a wild animal. As expected, their first attempt to release Elsa was unsuccessful. They drove her many miles away from their camp and left her with food. In the morning she had returned to camp and was waiting for her meal. The Adamsons made many more attempts, driving further away, and leaving food. They assumed that when she was hungry enough, she would hunt. However, since lions hunt in packs, this was an unrealistic expectation. They even tried rousting out a small wart hog and having Elsa hunt it herself. While she did chase it and tackled it to the ground, she wouldn’t bite or kill it. She thought it wanted to play with her, and allowed it to charge and head-but her. The Adamsons were mystified.

Finally, the Adamsons decided to drive Elsa away and pack up their camp as well, so she couldn’t track them. “It was nearly a week before we returned. We found her waiting, and very hungry. She was full of affection; we had deceived her so often, broken faith with her, done so much to destroy her trust in us, yet she remained loyal” (Adamson, 134). When the Adamsons returned to their usual campsite, Elsa was emaciated, and had clearly not successfully hunted on her own. The Adamsons felt as though they had failed her; they hadn’t prepared her with the tools she needed to survive. Despite the fact that such an attempt had never been made, the Adamsons’ experience with Elsa could have been devastating. A lone lioness without a pride of her own is vulnerable to attacks by other lions. Fortunately, Elsa was only hungry upon their return and had not been severely injured.
All the while, the Adamson’s faced another dilemma. They realized that, as Game Warden, George was tracking dangerous lions for the protection of people, but was raising a tame lioness at home. Joy was especially aware of this conflict and reflected on their situation while listening to a chorus of lions roaring upriver, Elsa sleeping by her side in the tent:

The paradox of the situation came clearly to my mind: here we were hunting dangerous man-eaters by day and by night, yet when we returned exhausted and defeated we looked forward to being with Elsa, who compensated us for the fatigue and strain by her affection. Lion versus lion? Whatever the relationship, I could not help admiring these wild creatures...and regarded them as the most intelligent of all wild animals and held them in respect. (Adamson, 72-73)

Their experiences with Elsa had made them realize the clash they faced between two worlds: one human and one animal. These sorts of reflections set the Adamsons aside from Trader Horn, and even Huxley to some extent. The Adamsons recognize that they have a responsibility to protect both humans and the animals of Africa. They are working against the imperialist habits formerly imposed upon the landscape by British colonists and are attempting to compensate for the actions of the past.

Without any other solutions, the Adamsons took Elsa within thirty miles of her birthplace, where she was raised and was familiar with the geography. They hoped she would be comfortable in this environment, which was protected by other Game Wardens to prevent poachers from targeting Elsa. As Joy reflects, “Although up to now there was no record of a hand-reared lion being successfully liberated, we still hoped that Elsa would be able to adapt herself to wild life, to a life to which she had always been so close” (Adamson, 173). To reinforce her natural instincts, George would hunt and wound animals for her, with the intention that she would track and kill them herself. This technique worked increasingly well and Elsa learned she could hunt by herself. This was one of the largest breakthroughs they experienced
with Elsa. The Adamsons had raised and nurtured this lioness not to be a passive house pet, but into a powerful and self-sufficient predator again—the kind of predator that Trader Horn sought to kill only fifty years earlier.

With all this, the Adamsons returned to England and left Elsa with her new family to live wild and free as was always intended. They returned to Africa only a few months later to visit Elsa and see how she was surviving in the wild. George and Joy were able to track the pride and were even visited by Elsa on one occasion. She was affectionate toward them, looked healthy and fit, but it was clear she had made the transformation from house pet to wild lioness. The Adamsons returned to Africa once more six months later and were greeted by Elsa with a litter of her own cubs in toe. It was a true accomplishment for George and Joy Adamson to have successfully released Elsa back into her natural habitat, without any of the knowledge or tracking equipment we possess today. Their compassion and dedication to her survival and release into the wilds of Africa ultimately triggered further scientific interest in this method of conservation. Their success was a testament to their affection for Elsa and an indication that British attitudes toward big game had radically shifted from hunting to conservation.

The success of *Born Free* in print led to the motion picture *Born Free* in 1966, which starred Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna. This couple was transformed by their experience making the movie and the dedication of Joy and George Adamson and became widely known environmental and animal rights activists. Travers and McKenna were so inspired by Adamson’s experience with Elsa that they created what is now known as the Born Free Foundation with the aim of protecting threatened, endangered or vulnerable animals around the world, but especially in Africa. Virginia was especially dedicated to the release of captured animals from zoos, back into the wild. Her commitment to this effort was further driven by her
experience with African elephant Pole-Pole in the movie *An Elephant Called Slowly*. McKenna worked with the elephant in the movie but after production the young calf was sent to the London Zoo. McKenna and Travers did everything in their power to rescue Pole-Pole from the zoo. She was the only elephant there, with no family, no communication. They decided they wanted to visit her at the zoo, many years after the movie, to see her condition and try to rescue her. “We watched her pace her lonely, repetitive path to and fro in front of the elephant house, and then we called her name. *Pole Pole*. She stopped. She turned toward us. She walked to the edge of the moat and extended her trunk toward our outstretched hands. It was an agony I feel to this day. She still recognized us. That recognition, was it forgiveness?” (McKenna, 31) After this heartbreaking experience, McKenna and Travers began their campaign to relocate animals like Pole-Pole back into their natural habitat, with the foundation of Zoo Check, renamed The Born Free Foundation in 1991. Unfortunately, their efforts for Pole-Pole were unsuccessful and she died in captivity, but since then, the foundation has been carried on, and is another indication that animals once targeted as desirable game have now become the focus of our conservation efforts.

VI. **Overlap: Horn, Huxley, and Adamson**

These three memoirs overlap in their observations and experiences in Africa in two key ways. First, all three authors noticed the special relationship the Kikuyu, Boran or other African tribes had with their environment. Second, they witnessed the clashes between the activities of humans and the needs of the wild animals. Huxley describes the actions of the native tribes by stating that, “Although they had a name for all the shrubs and tress and birds, they walked about their country without appearing to possess it...they had not aspired to re-create or change or tame
the country and to bring it under their control” (Huxley, 46). This astonished both Huxley and her family because their presence in Africa was to accomplish one major goal: make large sums of money from their coffee plantation.

Horn mentions how the Kikuyu protect their lands and their sacred elephants. They survived in the harsh elements, the droughts and intense heat, and killed only what they needed, never more. According to Huxley, “The natives of Africa had accepted what God, or nature, had given them without apparently wishing to improve upon it in any significant way” (Huxley, 46). This was an entirely different perspective for both Horn and Huxley, and something they had never considered before. The Adamsons underwent a transition similar to that of Horn and Huxley. Once they began raising Elsa, they realized that they were only one aspect of the complex and diverse African landscape. Being so close to a wild lioness helped the Adamsons broaden their frame of reference and recognize their impact on the environment. As the Game Warden, George was already aware of the natives’ experiences with the land. He knew they only took what they needed from nature—never more.

All three authors also mentioned the clashes between humans and nature. These conflicts were not limited to the British colonists, but included the native people as well. Horn was frequently asked to hunt elephants and lions that threatened villages. While this was outside of his duties as a trader, he felt obligated to assist the tribes and made an excursion out of it. Huxley identified similar issues for her family’s coffee plantation. “The guinea-fowl were regarded as a pest by the Kikuyu because they came into the shambas and scratched up seed...” (Huxley, 113). This clearly shows that both authors struggled with the conflict between the boundaries of their own land, and the habitat and natural practices of the animals. George
Adamson had a similar role to Horn in protecting the natives from the attack of lions or other large animals, but he also enforced poaching laws and protected the animals as well.

An insightful analysis by Harriet Ritvo shed light on the transition described here:

Gradually, the idea that the elimination of wild animals from appropriated districts was an inevitable by-product of progress was replaced by one that viewed them as a valuable resource requiring protection. Still symbolic of uncivilised nature, game no longer represented a serious threat. Instead, it evoked a special kind of property, neither public nor private, that Britons felt they possessed in their Asian and African territories. (Ritvo, 37)

By the time *Born Free* was published and made into a film in 1964, a transition for Britons and the world alike had taken place. It changed how people learned about the environment and made them aware of the need for conserving these species.

VI. Lasting Impacts and Concluding Thoughts

It wasn’t until the middle of the twentieth century that the decline of big game, primarily elephants, rhinoceros, giraffes and water buffalo, was recognized. Fewer animals seemed to migrate the same paths each year. When the elephants were hunted, it was noticed that their tusks were considerably shorter and thicker. The elephants with the largest tusks had all been hunted for their ivory, and thus were not able to reproduce (Photo 3). Protection through increased prosecution of poachers, establishment of natural reserves and parks, and the promotion of ecotourism have all helped in the preservation of these unique species. Recently, conservation organizations have closely monitored the health of big game populations. This was not always the case, however, and commercial poachers have had their impact. As historian Mark Cioc states, “Subsistence and recreational hunters had a modest impact on the world’s wildlife stocks in the early twentieth century, but it was market hunters who caused the bulk of
the devastation...Market hunters depleted species the way miners depleted ore seams, moving to new sites after exhausting the old ones, thinking only of today’s profit and not tomorrow’s patrimony” (Cioc, 4). A recent National Geographic article titled “Rhino Wars” delves directly into the demand for rhino horn on the black markets for medicinal uses in China and Vietnam. Unfortunately, it must be globally recognized that if our habits don’t continue to change, five species of rhino: the white, black, greater one-horned, Sumatran, and Javan, all of which are critically endangered, may cease to exist within my lifetime.

Works of literature like those written by Horn, Huxley and Adamson are important in acknowledging the changes that have occurred in the treatment of animals since the turn of the last century, and the work that is ahead of us. As George Page admits in the foreword to Born Free,

Today, as conservationists struggle to save the earth’s vanishing species, the breeding and raising of wild animals in captivity and then the introduction of them to appropriate habitat has become a successful repopulation technique. The problem, of course, is finding the appropriate habitat safe from an exploding human population that continues to push into the world’s remaining wild places. (Adamson, 6)

While many animals are still endangered, and recovering from the great impact of big game hunting, progress in their restoration has been made. Habitat loss for these animals due to the pressures of expanding human populations puts the preservation of animals and their habitat at the forefront of conservation efforts. African countries still struggle with the devastating effects of poachers driven by the thrill of hunting and the value of ivory and skins as Aloysius Horn was in the late 1800s. Legal hunting of these animals is still allowed and is offered through tours found on websites like www.elandsafaris.com/. While they are intended to hunt these animals “sustainably,” the tours are still designed for the elite as they cost thousands of dollars. The people who participate in these events are still driven by the thrill and wealth associated with the
hunt. A male lion trophy is worth almost $20,000 (elandsafari.com). As a result, these tours still reflect early imperialist culture and the desire for the domination of the environment.

If Trader Horn or The Flame Trees of Thika were published today, they would have a different impact on the public than they initially did. Horn’s book would almost certainly be rejected in England and the Western world as counterproductive to the conservation efforts of these countries. While it serves as a glimpse into the not-so-distant past, Horn’s adventures would now be considered an example of insensitive and ignorant attitudes toward the natural world that contribute to the current environmental crisis. As for Huxley’s book, the power it had in re-directing the mindsets of the British away from big game hunting and increasing in environmental awareness, led to the tremendous success of Born Free. The fact that all three of these books were bestsellers in their year of publication also indicates the change in the public’s attitude toward big game. Born Free is still a popular book and film, as evidenced by William Beinart’s recent article in Environmental History: “Born Free showed not just appreciation for other species, but for individuals among them” (Beinart, 284). Naming the lioness automatically made her more important to the public because as soon as we assign a name to an animal, it acquires a human trait and we automatically feel more compassionate toward it. “George Adamson believed that they had made a lasting impact on how human beings regard wild animals” (Beinart, 285). Arguably, the Adamsons’ work with Elsa had an effect similar to that of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring. It increased awareness of our impact on the environment, engaged the audience’s empathy, and served as a global call to action for the protection of our environment.

The world could use another book like it, to shake the public awake, re-energize conservation efforts of other animals—like the Javan rhino of which only 40 remain, or the
iconic polar bear whose habitat is melting away—and radically increase the awareness of global warming and the inevitable change of our climate. George Page thoughtfully characterizes this transition in the introduction of *Born Free*: “Future historians may look upon this as a century in which a fundamental shift in human attitude toward animals began to occur among people all over the world—the century when members of the human species began to understand that they were more closely related to other species that their cultural and scientific heritage had led them to believe” (Adamson, 5). It is this attitude, this connection and this awareness that must carry us through the twenty-first century and beyond. It marks the decline of British imperialist attitudes towards the natural world, and the emergence of a new environmental sentiment. But it also reveals the lasting impact the imperialist era had on the African continent. At the beginning of the 20th century, imperialism still meant exterminating the brutes, but by the end it meant conservation and returning animals to the wild. If progress is to be made in addressing our current crisis, there must be *global* recognition that we are simply another species on this planet—and that our fate is bound up with all the others.
Supplemental Photos

Photo 3: Mother elephant and two immature offspring with genetically shorter tusks.  
Source: http://animals.nationgeographic.com/

Photo 4: Joy Adamson and the three rescued lion cubs. 1956  
Source: Elsa Conservation Trust
Photo 5: Joy Adamson with Elsa, 1959.
Source: Elsa Conservation Trust
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