

**From appropriation to conservation of wild fauna.  
Colonization 's practices : the Belgian Congo study case (1885-1960)**

**By Patricia Van Schuylenbergh**

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of  
Doctor in Philosophy and Letters (History),  
Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, October 2006  
Promotor : Prof. Dr. J. Pirotte

*Executive summary*

The main objective of this doctorate is to present the basis of an environmental history, by studying changes impacted by colonialism on Congolese natural environment, and in particular, on wildlife. A thematic and diachronic presentation will increase this study's dynamic to bring out the changes in its various aspects. Its three main sections are well linked by the ambivalent nature of colonial policy various aims towards the use of fauna resources on one hand, and changes in wildlife management and protection ideology and practices on the other hand: appropriation-protection (1885-1908), collecting-preserving (1880-1930), promotion-conservation (1925-1960).

Thanks to the numerous documents from administration, literature, sciences and iconography, highlighted by recent works, the analysis of these themes provides an original face to Belgian colonial history in central Africa, a continuously evolving history as for ideas, practices and international influences. Two notions continuously move side by side or jostle together, compete or contribute: one, concerns its will to lay hands on this large area's abundant fauna, the other, to save what it is still unimpaired and avoid misappropriation.

From an out of reach, isolated and obscure condition, Congolese nature becomes a serviceable and rightfully controlled object. The colonial rule puts order and standardises it, while specifying its accessibility through written codes which ignore prior ownership and custom situations. Through new statutes and objectives, the colonizer becomes owner and manager, with a distinction between wilderness and land converted by him for other purposes, agriculture namely.

*Book I « Appropriation and Protection » (1885-1908)* throws light on the links between the policy setting up the fauna appropriation policy during the Congo Free State period and the emerging awareness of wildlife protection. The notion of hunting will help understanding these attitudes. As a vital activity of land extension and occupation, hunting establishes the colonizer's domination on the unknown and hostile environment, shows his power, and increases his prestige in the opinion of locals. Hunt for ivory, a long-standing activity for well armed and organized natives, is resumed by Europeans, as a significant income. The Congo Free State sets a complex and coercive legislation (controls, taxes and bonus) which forced locals to gather ivory in the State's interest to secure its ivory trade monopoly. The decreasing of elephants in the more accessible areas leads to consider the slowing down of this precious

resource wasting. This echoes some European powers' concerns like Great Britain, Germany and France, and is comforted by the first international meeting for protection of animals in Africa (London, 1900). The Congo Free State institutes protectionist rules like controlling hunting, protecting some species, creating hunting preserves, and domesticating useful species, as prevention to future extinction.

**Book II « Collecting and preserving » (1880-1930)** studies hunting specimens for science. Though its impact is less important than the other hunting categories (hunting for food, trade and sports), it indicates the home country considers fauna as an object to be collected or researched on. Collecting specimens in the field is organized under the determining impulse of Belgian scientists, progressively backed up by colonial officials, from commanding centers like *Musée des Sciences Naturelles of Belgium* or *Musée du Congo belge*. This institute sets out prospecting campaigns with the help of numerous voluntary workers, scientific or amateurs, who give material to classification and taxonomy.

This practice therefore emulates nationalization and internationalization of scientific exploration of Congo, as the headquarters for collecting unknown forms of life. Preserving traces of the area original primitivism is of cardinal importance. In this perspective Museum institution plays various roles: collecting and exhibiting primordial specimens, rare or nearing extinction; getting audiences aware of the necessity of protecting the Congolese fauna and lobbying colonial authorities.

This Belgian wish to preserve African wildlife takes place in the confluence in the confluence of European and American inspirations which defend the safeguard of the natural, historical and cultural heritage against destructions and vandalism caused by progress, industrialisation and air and sea pollution. Several personalities reveal this situation and lead to constitution of protection movement of sites, landscapes, forest and animals. Scientists, mostly zoologists, follow this movement, engage progressively their expertise in national and international meetings and organize networking to promote protection of some species and, a little bit later, the creation of natural reserves and national parks all around the world.

**Book III "Promotion - conservation" (1925-1960)**, presents all the various solutions the colony put on against the dilapidation of the Congolese faunal heritage, during this period. By setting up a policy taking care of nature conservation, the State chooses a pragmatic approach which offers practical and instrumental answers to local problems caused by losses of specific ecosystems. While replying to a global interrogation on agricultural policy about land and natural resources development, the State chooses a rational "American" way of conservation, focusing on various tools and implements intended to distinguish wild areas from domesticated ones, and to guarantee sufficient faunal resources for various needs (food, trade, domestication, protection of the species). In order to do so, the State develops various ways: presence and expertise of big game agents on hunting grounds, reforming the hunting legislation, creation of hunting reservations with specific statutes, characteristics and objectives. The State also supports the creation of the national parks, managed by the *Institute of the National Parks of Belgian Congo*. These constitute the acme of the fauna preservation program in the Belgian colony. Designed to safeguard the endemic species of some selected biotopes, these "strict natural reserves" allowing degraded soils to regenerate are intended to be privileged places for observations and methods to be used elsewhere. These parks also aimed at providing a supply of food for the Congolese future generations. On the other hand,

they become the typical scene for struggle about ideologies and boundaries, between the colonial authorities and the national park ones. Ones or the other's priorities brought endless conflicts: the immediate use of the grounds by and for the local populations to the benefit of the colony, on one hand; the maintenance of empty areas, allowing the biotopes to regenerate, on the other hand.

This research outcome will contribute to the current ecological reflection in this part of Africa. It offers a comparative knowledge on ideas, practices, results and crisis occurred several decades ago. It is intended to be published for a well-informed public. A revised compact version is currently in preparation.