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## *Maasai Evictions Trigger Frankfurters' Fake Condemnation*



Maasai flee shootings, Tanzania, June 2022.

Tanzanian police shooting Maasai is just the latest episode in a chronicle of evicting local people for conservation, a tragedy which began for Africa over a hundred years ago and

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has deprived thousands of their lands and birthright. In this particular case, the government wants the Maasai pastoralists out of a “Protected Area”, Loliondo in Ngorongoro, to free it up for tourism and trophy hunting. Atrocities have been going on there for a long time, but there’s now a new and important development: it’s the first time they’ve been “condemned” by big conservation NGOs,<sup>[1]</sup> including the one which developed the policy leading to the violence, the Frankfurt Zoological Society.<sup>[2]</sup> No one should be taken in by this subterfuge from an organisation which one Maasai describes as, “enemy number one”. It’s also the first time – and the two “firsts” are connected – that the violence inherent in a conservation land grab has been broadcast around the world in real time. Within a few minutes of Maasai uploading mobile phone footage it was in the public domain, with its unarguable drama: the thuds of the bullets; the Maasai fleeing in their red robes, overtaking others who hadn’t yet seen the danger; the shakiness of a cameraman close to the line of fire.<sup>[3]</sup> This was cinéma-vérité on a level previously unimaginable in the history of conservation.

People like me, who have been campaigning against similar crimes for decades, were able to assess the footage, appreciate its genuineness and relay it on in just a couple of minutes. By the time the Tanzanian authorities realised the scale of the exposure, and were making a feeble effort to deny it had happened, the horse had bolted.

When news of similar atrocities was publicised in the past, there was never filmed proof. Twenty years ago, the NGO<sup>[4]</sup> I then worked with gave Gana and Gwi “Bushmen” in Botswana a video camera to record events as they too were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands in the world’s second biggest “game reserve”. In 2005, when they too were shot at, the camera wasn’t in the right place and no footage was secured. If it had been, it would still have taken days to get out. It’s easy to forget just how recent smartphone video and widespread internet connection are.

It’s true that we subsequently recorded and publicised a lot of indigenous testimonies, not only by the Gana and Gwi, but also by Adivasis evicted from tiger reserves in India, and Baka, Bayaka and Batwa indigenous peoples in the Congo Basin. These were powerful and moving witness statements, but they were always after the event.<sup>[5]</sup> In an engaging illustration of African resilience in the face of tragedy, some even spun in a thread of comedy!<sup>[6]</sup>



Baka ridicules the idea that WWF supports them.

The Baka, Bayaka, and Batwa live not far from the famous Virunga, established in the 1920s as Africa's first formal "national park" and currently directed by a Belgian prince, Emmanuel de Merode. It too was founded, as they all were and still are, through kicking out the local indigenous folk. Violating people for supposed "conservation" has continued ever since, but never captured on film. In DR Congo, the Kahuzi-Biega park threw out thousands of Batwa in the 1970s, and rangers and their army colleagues killed, mutilated, raped, and imprisoned dozens, including children, who tried to go back to their homeland in recent years. Similar narratives are rife in the Salonga park in the same country, the Lobeké park in Cameroon, as well as the Ozdala park and at Messok-Dja in Congo-Brazzaville. WWF is now pushing in the latter to make yet another park, and ensuring the locals are mistreated and kept away, as usual.

Park rangers in all of them, the guys with the guns, are supported by western conservation NGOs, including African Parks (where Prince Harry is the president), the Wildlife Conservation Society (which once kept the Congolese Mbuti man, Ota Benga, in the zoo), and WWF.

In the last few years, the formulaic NGO response to conservation atrocities has been to deny them and, only after pressure from publicity, then reluctantly admit that a few "bad apple" rangers might have overstepped the mark. The relevant NGO then usually pays for

an investigation, taking months if not years, hoping that media attention moves on, as it will. Any resulting reports are whitewashed or simply buried if they stray towards the truth.

It may be opportune now for the Frankfurt Zoo to condemn the violence which everyone can see, but it still fails to assign blame, and rejects all responsibility for its own role. It has wanted Maasai out since it first became involved in the 1950s through its Nazi founder and director, the famous Bernhard Grzimek.<sup>[7]</sup> By seemingly condemning incidents which cannot be plausibly denied, it presumably hopes to divert attention not only away from its own complicity, but also from the criminal pattern of “fortress conservation” it supports.



Survival International advert in the British press, 2005, to stop the shootings in pre-social media days.

The wider conservation industry will doubtless lament this shooting and see it as a major strategic blunder, but that will be to try and mask the fact that it's neither new nor unusual. The land grab off local indigenous people is underpinned by a war on sustainable and self-sufficient ways of life which has been waged for generations. Conservationists and their government allies don't want herders or subsistence hunters on land which they seek to control and profit from, usually nowadays through tourism, selling phoney “carbon credits”, or simply by taking its resources. In the specific case in Tanzania, the land theft is for trophy hunting by United Arab Emirates' nobility as well as tourism, but in the end it always comes down to money and control, not conservation.

This war is also now playing out in Europe, albeit with money rather than guns: “rewilding” taking land from herders is promoted as a supposed answer to climate change

and biodiversity loss, and even to avoiding pandemics. It's phoney: it's easy to show it won't help mitigate any of these problems.<sup>[8]</sup> The truth is that most conservationists just don't like herders, or subsistence hunters, and never have. In fact, they don't like anyone living directly off the land. They want their "Nature" empty of inhabitants except themselves and those who serve them.

The "wild Africa" they strive to create has never existed outside their own cinema and sermons, but they remain as determined as ever to fabricate it, and they care little about who gets trodden on through what they believe is their pietistic calling.

The problem isn't just their self-righteous conviction: the conservation industry gets paid awe-inspiring sums by governments and foundations to manage national parks and similar areas which deprive people of lives and livelihoods. They are now pushing to double them, to cover 30% of the globe.

It's important to understand that the Frankfurt Zoo's declared "condemnation" of the Maasai shootings isn't a first step towards acknowledging its crimes: it's a deflective feint in the generations' old battle for land control in Africa. It's just another facet of colonialism.

At the same time, the conservation faith now suddenly finds itself on the defensive as never before. The ground has shifted but, make no mistake, its proponents have immense resources and will fight to retain their power and manifest belief in their destiny. This supposed "condemnation" should be seen for the ruse it is, and the conservation NGOs must be pushed back. Let's hope the Maasai can continue to take a real stand in doing so, both for their own destiny, their environment, and for all of our futures. It's the conservation NGOs who are against the real "natural world", not the Maasai.

#### **Notes.**

1) <https://www.iucn.org/news/secretariat/202206/iucn-statement-human-rights-violations-loliondo-tanzania> ↑

2) <https://fzs.org/en/news/appraisal-of-the-situation-of-loliondo/> ↑

3) [https://twitter.com/SusannaN2/status/1535197438843183104?s=20&t=dXYCVH\\_15LQH16KRPcb3Hw](https://twitter.com/SusannaN2/status/1535197438843183104?s=20&t=dXYCVH_15LQH16KRPcb3Hw) ↑

4) Survival International. ↑

5) [https://twitter.com/StephenCorrySv1/status/1234902190956908544?s=20&t=dXYCVH\\_15LQH16KRPcb3Hw](https://twitter.com/StephenCorrySv1/status/1234902190956908544?s=20&t=dXYCVH_15LQH16KRPcb3Hw) ↑

6) [https://twitter.com/StephenCorrySv1/status/1229073166347243523?s=20&t=dXYCVH\\_15LQH16KRPcb3Hw](https://twitter.com/StephenCorrySv1/status/1229073166347243523?s=20&t=dXYCVH_15LQH16KRPcb3Hw) ↑

7) <https://www.theelephant.info/features/2022/04/18/ngorongoro-nazi/> ↑

8) <https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/02/24/new-deal-for-nature-paying-the-emperor-to-fence-the-wind/> ↑

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