

THE NATIONAL PARK OF GORONGOZA

By Dr. MARIO DE ALCANTARA

“ Gorongoza is, without any doubt, one of the most marvellous wild life sanctuaries in the world. The variety and abundance of animals is wonderful. Nobody should let slip an opportunity of seeing this place where old Africa has been safely preserved.”

These were the words of admiration which Mr. Victor Cahalane, chief biologist of the United States National Parks Department, entered in the visitors' book after his visit to the Gorongoza Park.

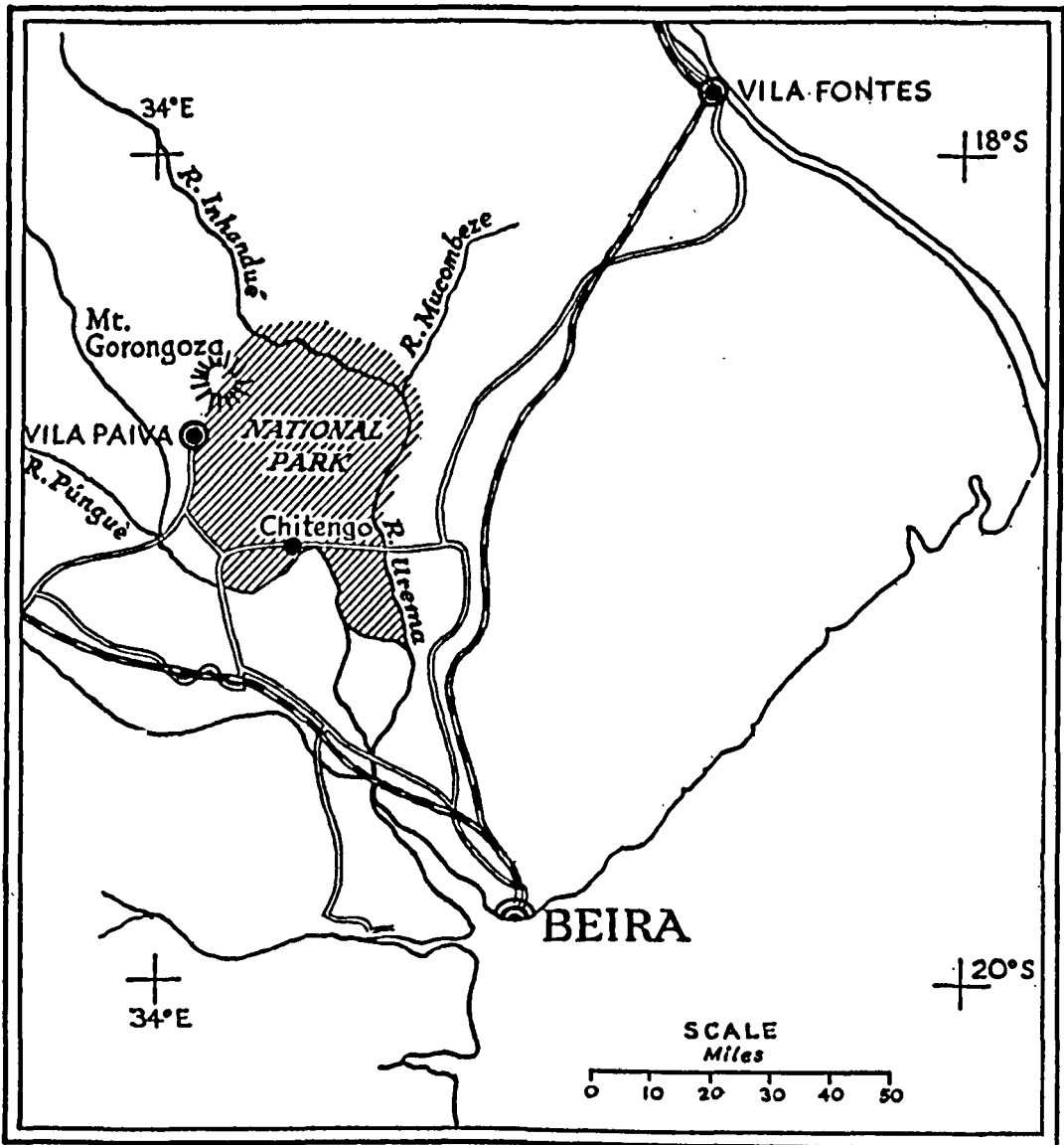
Yet, although more than thirty years have passed since the Gorongoza game reserve was created, it can boldly be asserted that only a few hundred Portuguese have visited this place of so great and such varied beauty. Even more surprising is it that among these visitors there have been many who could neither feel nor understand the wonder of this place.

To what can we ascribe this lack of understanding among a people who have always been distinguished by an adventurous spirit and a capacity for contemplation? Not, certainly, to general apathy or lack of appreciation for the great spectacles of Nature, since few are the Portuguese of the province of Mozambique who, attracted by an active and intelligent publicity, have not spent a few days of leisure in the Kruger National Park or in other reserves of near-by territories.

No. Paradoxical as it seems, the reason why Gorongoza has not attracted more visitors from inside Mozambique, is merely that the park is Mozambican. A strange reason, but one which finds easy acceptance among those who, remembering the unbounded richness of the game in Mozambique two or three decades ago, or after seeing one of the few places where the old abundance still remains, consider game reserves, or any rules to protect the fauna, an encumbrance to the development of the province and, sometimes, an attack on their own profits.

One can hear it said in every corner of Mozambique with an annoying tone of satisfaction, that it is understandable that our neighbours should set up parks and reserves, for they have already swept away all game from their territories. But here in Mozambique, a country where wild animals are so abundant; where buffaloes, elephants and leopards can be seen at the door; where throughout the country, wild animals destroy harvests and menace cattle; where to protect game, fertile ground is kept from human use, here we must kill and destroy.

This indeed is their way of speaking and thinking, or rather of



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not thinking, for it should be very easy to show how mistaken are those who proclaim an inexhaustible abundance of wild animals. But from this false vision of excessive richness and from the wrong judgements to which it has led proceeds the apathy or even the malevolence with which some people regard the National Park of Gorongosa.

Gorongosa and its history.—Gorongosa is a vast region in the district of Manica and Sofala, where the plain, sloping downward from the mountain in the north from which it takes its name, stretches in an immense open fan from Villa Fontes to Beira. Its appearance is varied and attractive. Wherever one turns its colourful serenity holds and excites the imagination.

Water flows everywhere, causing dark green lines of vegetation across the huge panel of the plains. Here, a tight tuft of shrub rises in a dark-green hillock; there, the melancholy top of a solitary tree shades the ground; beyond, a group of palm trees resemble the columns of an unfinished temple. All this is softened by the carpet of tender green that covers every corner without a wrinkle or crack.

To the north-west, the undulations of the ground rise more and more irregularly to the mountain terraces that, outlined by sinuous lines of dense forest, lead to the hills that form the mountain of Gorongoza, one of the most surprising beauty spots of all the provinces of Mozambique. Streams of crystal water leap from terrace to terrace, bringing life to the plains below and making Gorongoza a fit home for its rich and varied fauna.

The Gorongoza reserve was started in 1921. It then covered about 1,000 square kilometres bounded by the Inhanduè river in the north, the Urema river in the east, and to the south and west by imaginary lines parallel to the courses of the Púnguè and Urema rivers.

The place was intelligently selected, not only for its richness of animal and vegetable life, but also for its excellent position on the communications connecting Mozambique with the bordering territories. It is only 140 kilometres by main road from the town of Beira. It is served by roads to the North and South Rhodesias and to Nyasaland.

In 1935 the reserve was enlarged to 3,200 square kilometres and thus included habitats and animals absent from the original area. Its boundaries then reached the confluence of the Macombezi and Inhanduè rivers in the north, the river Púnguè in the south, and Vila Paiva in the west.

The original purpose of the reserve had been almost exclusively economic but now was added the high objectives of science, conservation and education. It would seem that these purposes should have had the acceptance and support of everybody, but it did not happen so. Unscrupulous hunters, excluded from part of their hunting grounds by the enlargement of the reserve, took their posts on its borders and shot down relentlessly any animal that crossed them, sparing only those whose meat or hides appeared unprofitable. For years, especially during the dry season when pastures were thin and water vanishing, these butchers were in action. Many wounded animals went back into the reserve, discrediting the Portuguese in the eyes of foreign visitors and becoming a danger to tourists.

No control could stop these men for they all had licences and

official action ceased at the borders of the reserve. To the complaints and protests of some, to the indignation of all and to the exertions of the authorities, the reply was a fusillade of musketry along the reserve's borders.

This was the degrading aspect of the National Park of Gorongoza with which the present Hunting Commission was confronted. Aware of the reserve's high spiritual significance and, consequently, of its contribution to the cultural aspect of the province, this Hunting Commission, after a few months of study, suggested to the Government a set of rules which would put an end to this evil and bring peace to the animals of the park and security to visitors.

In 1951, basing its plans on the suggestions of the Hunting Commission, the Government established a protective belt around the park under special laws. This brought the total area, park and reserve, to 12,000 square kilometres and established the sanctuary of Gorongoza about which Colonel Sandenbergh, then warden of the Kruger National Park, said: ". . . Gorongoza is potentially the best game reserve of all Africa. . . . The peoples of the whole world owe a debt of gratitude to the Portuguese nation for having preserved this wild life African Paradise."

The Camps of Gorongoza.—The first camping ground was the main plain a short distance from the many lagoons of the Urema river. It was an excellent place for watching animals but was flooded during a great part of the rainy season. This fact determined the move to Chitengo, at a higher elevation and situation in the deep re-entrant of the Púnguè and on the road which crosses the reserves in the south. Here is the present comfortable, hygienic and well-lighted camp, served by good roads and an airfield. Tracks from Chitengo go to all parts of the reserve. Another camp is now being built on Mount Gorongoza itself.

Wild Life in Gorongoza.—In the short grass plains, sometimes congregated, sometimes scattered, sometimes in easily distinguishable families but always in numbers difficult to estimate, graze waterbuck, blue wildebeest, eland, buffalo, oribi, zebra and reedbuck. In the air fly flocks of pelican, Egyptian geese and other long-legged birds. In and around the lagoons large concentrations of hippopotamus move sluggishly. On land the wart hog thrives.

In the reddish-yellow grass on the margins of the "tandos" and in the shrub may be found lion, hyæna and packs of hunting dogs. In the open jungle clearings grow the acacia

xantophlaea, the palm-tree and the succulent gramineae—*Panicum*, *Setaria*, *Andropogon*, etc. Here live elephants, hartebeests, roan antelope, impala, baboons, leopards, foxes, civets, guinea-fowls and partridges.

In valleys near the mountain are found rhinoceros, kudu and nyala. Crocodiles live in the rivers, ostriches and zebra come quite close to Chitengo.

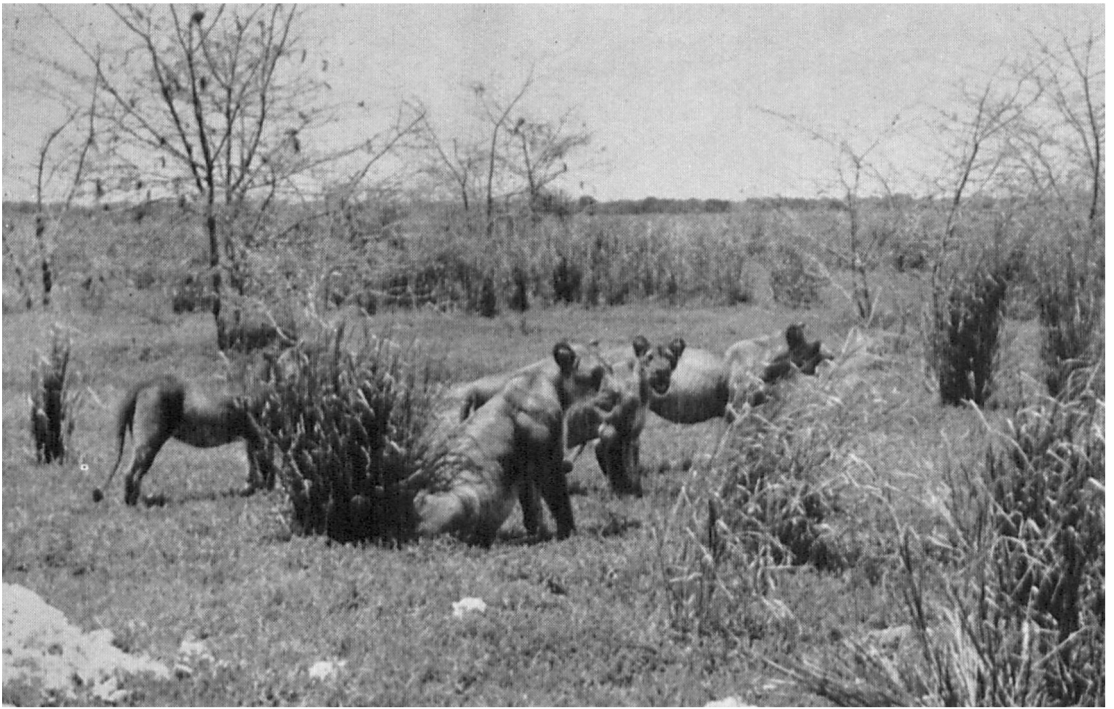
Recent explorations in the almost unknown north zone of the park have revealed a fauna as abundant and varied as that of the south.

Visitors.—The park is open to the visitors all the year round. Nevertheless, the most favourable season is from May to October, for in the other months large parts of the plains are submerged in water and many tracks are not practicable.

The tourist to Gorongosa should first call at the “AGENCIA DO TURISMO” in Beira, where he will be given all necessary information to ensure the success of his visit. The Agency can also arrange accommodation in Beira and transport.

Note by Dr. Jacinto Martinho, to whom the Society is indebted for his help in obtaining the above article.

“ ‘Tando’ is a native word which means open ground without trees, often of great extent, surrounded by forest. As it is at a lower level than its surroundings, water accumulates there in the rainy season. Sometimes in its lowest parts a lagoon is formed, -with permanent water, where the wild animals go to quench their thirst. I take it that the word ‘tando’ corresponds to what in Rhodesia and South Africa they call ‘vleiss’.”



LIONS AND BUFFALOES IN THE GORONGOZA NATIONAL PARK.