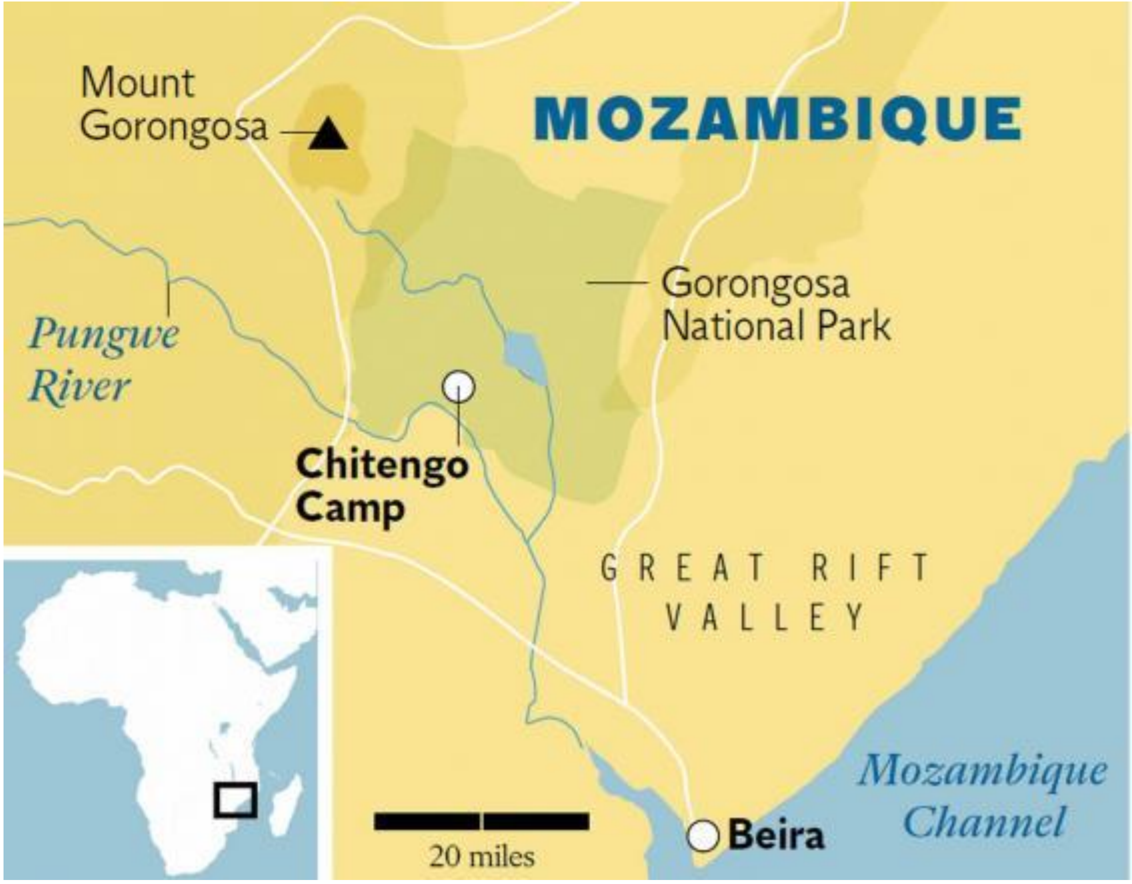
Highlights from WHITE MAN’S GAME by Stephanie Hanes

Tanzania
Indian Ocean
Malawi
Lake Nyasa
Zambia
Nampula
Madagascar
Zimbabwe
Beira
Mozambique
Maputo
S. Africa
Swaziland

Background on Gorongosa Park:

This park shared the name of the mountain, Gorongosa. At one time—before being ravaged by two decades of war and another decade of neglect—the Gorongosa National Park was widely considered one of the best safari locations in southern Africa, on the bucket list of destinations for the rich and famous of Europe and America. By the time the helicopter was hovering over the mountain, though, it held a different attraction. Now the Gorongosa National Park was home to what some were calling one of the most ambitious conservation efforts on the continent, a groundbreaking initiative to restore both environmental and human dignity.



How the views of Western "do-gooders" were different from people who lived in or near Gorongosa:

The scientists and conservationists and development experts, educated in the best Western academies, decidedly did not think that ancient spirits were present all around them, or that any of the other supernatural beings whom rural Mozambicans routinely credit with the fortunes and misfortunes of daily life actually existed.

They were, however, familiar with and committed to the best practices of development and human rights. They believed in local buy-in, local involvement, and, at least ostensibly, local input—all those categories newly tracked by the alphabet soup of donor organizations concerned with Africa. So, identifying the regional "thought leader," and gaining his culturally appropriate endorsement, was an important part of their work.

It was only when I abandoned the quest for the one "true" story that I started to understand what was really happening there, in the lush heart of Southeast Africa. I also started to realize that the contradictory Gorongosa stories are not exclusive to the region, but are representative of what is happening all over the globe in other environmental "hot spots" as the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs, in development lingo) dealing with conservation call them. So many of these ecologically essential swaths of the developing world are at the center of a clash of narratives, a collision of truths that has a profound impact both on the people cast as characters in these dramas and on our environment.

In general, those big-name philanthropists of the 1900s—Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, and their ilk—were basically motivated to give because they believed that if you made a ton of money, it was simply the right thing to do to give much of it away. They wanted to uplift humanity, so they gave huge sums to institutions that they figured were doing that, such as libraries and colleges.

While I was reporting in Mozambique, and for a long stretch thereafter, I wasted a lot of time trying to figure out what was true in Gorongosa. This was foolish, of course, because to try to tease truth out of any complicated, intercultural, multireligious, secular-spiritual, good-and-evil, humanity-and-nature debate—let alone one in a foreign land, conducted primarily in a language that is not one's mother tongue—is the sort of quest that has stumped more than a few famous philosophers and mystics. There is no absolute certainty here that even the best investigative reporter could hope to find. But this didn't stop me from trying, for quite a while, to tally up the evidence.

A generation after Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species*, the late-Victorian era saw the emergence of various theories that applied the notion of evolution to social and policy matters – what lager became known as social Darwinism. The basic gist of this rhetoric was that the poorer, darker, more “primitive” people of the world were simply lagging behind white industrialized society in the world’s sure and steady progression toward modernity. This theory handily helped explain away a whole host of inequalities that might otherwise have bothered democracy-loving Americans and Europeans. And it also suggested that progressive science could propel those primitive populations toward enlightenment and understanding. Science was to be not only a tool of measurement and mapping, but also the method of social improvement.

One doesn’t have to look too deeply into development literature today to see the staying power of this particular story. In everything from conservation to economic revitalization projects, the West uses the language of scientific analysis and intervention, aiming to improve the lot of those people whose lifestyles are not as “modern” as ours. The language is different—we think only a racist would say that Africans as a category are somehow, inherently, behind—but we snap our fingers all the same, hoping to move people along that evolutionary line we call development.

Those of us who looked beneath the surface found even more of a mess: a spiderweb of international contractors, aid sent with devastating economic strings attached, accounting acrobatics that categorized military assistance as food aid. Overall, the developing world did see improvement on many of the UN antipoverty measures, but a lot of those gains in the standard of living had to do with macroeconomic development in China and India, not G8 aid. And while the total amount of foreign aid did increase somewhat, the aid gap (the difference between the promised amount of aid and the amount actually delivered) was growing, and would continue to do so throughout the 2000s.

Many of us who wrote about failed aid projects were open to these anti-aid arguments, and found the reaction from aid proponents a bit histrionic. (“Books like that—they’re promoting evil,” Bill Gates said of Dead Aid.) Still, completely abandoning all aid to the continent somehow felt wrong, even to the most cynical journalists. It seemed a suspiciously convenient match for a neoconservative political stance that idolized the free market above all else.

Greg Carr (the American philanthropist who worked so hard to reclaim the park)

From the beginning, I liked Greg, and I fell in love with the breathtaking Gorongosa region. Yet the longer I stayed, the more the stories I found diverged from one another, and I increasingly wondered what was actually happening there. The more I watched the glowing news reports and reverent documentaries about the project—and there have been quite a few of those over the past ten years—the more they bothered me. For quite a long time, I tried to resolve the competing narratives,

As promised, there was a panel discussion with Greg, along with the World Wildlife Fund’s Judy Oglethorpe (who had pointed me to Gorongosa in the first place), filmmaker James Byrne, and the Mozambican minister of tourism, Fernando Sumbana Jr. Hardball host Chris Matthews was the moderator. Matthews was one of Greg’s many friends, and about a year earlier he and his wife, Kathleen, had visited the park on Greg’s invitation. Matthews was so impressed by what he saw that when he got back to the States, he shared photos from his trip on his television show. “I just got back from Africa," he told his audience. "This is serious business. It's HIV stuff, and it's saving the wildlife, the number-one treasure of Africa. They have got to save it. They have to. That's what they can sell in years to come." On Hardball, Matthews gave a "real shout-out" to Greg, who is "is working and investing so hard to rebuild the great Gorongosa game park in Mozambique. He's working with the government there of that country to bring back that country's precious resource." Matthews also wanted to "pay tribute" to Ted Reilly, the controversial conservationist in Swaziland whose rangers' shoot-to-kill practices were opposed by Thuli Brilliance Makama, the Goldman Prize winner. Matthews was proud of the get-tough approach to conservation. "I have got to praise King Mswati himself for having the strength and vision to mean it. And he bans poaching, zero tolerance, no bail, no breaks. You kill, you go to jail. We have had too many elephants and rhinos killed in that part of the world." Now, in front of the National Geographic crowd, Matthews took a similar position of knowing authority. To back it up, he explained to the audience that he had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Swaziland during the 1960s. I wondered if anyone else noted that this is a different country from the one in which Gorongosa is located. Or if anyone else had doubts about whether going

But the audience seemed generally unfazed. They asked lots of questions, primarily of Greg and James. They were so glad that Greg was doing this work. They were fascinated with James's filmmaking and wanted to know more about how he did it. They wanted to know how things were going now. As the discussion neared its end, with the wine and cheese reception ready for VIP guests, Matthews spoke sternly to Sumbana. Mozambique was a beautiful country, Matthews told him. He hoped that the Mozambican people would realize what a jewel they had in Gorongosa Park. I squirmed in my seat, and glanced around to check if seeing this African get lectured by yet another white American man was making anyone else uncomfortable. People in Washington have good game faces, though. I couldn't tell what anyone there thought. Moments later, the crowd stood up to give Greg and his project a standing ovation. The film, with the particular way it presented Gorongosa, no doubt reinforced and solidified those preexisting narratives. Conservation is good. Africa needs help. Progressive science will save the day.

Around Gorongosa, Greg and his team—whiter, more moneyed, and with far greater access to the ear of the central government than the local population—appeared to be the heavies, even if they did not intend to be. The park rangers were thus newly empowered as well, which created further tensions in the area. Heidi [Gengenbach, then assistant profess or African history at Harvard] told me that she had interviewed two men caught by park law enforcement for allegedly poaching cane rats, a typical food item in rural Mozambique. The men told her that the rangers brought them back to one of the remote ranger posts and beat them. "We were catching rats – just rats!" she recalls them saying as they showed her the scars. "The tortured us for rats."

More important for the book, though, I asked Greg what he saw as the greatest accomplishments of the Gorongosa restoration project. He did not answer this directly. Instead, he replied with more than a dozen e-mails, by turns friendly and aggressive, upbeat and indignant, saying that criticism of the park was fundamentally misguided. He warned me that I was risking my professional reputation by publishing a book that cast doubt on his work in Mozambique or on the Gorongosa project overall. "I am writing to you as a friend with a warning and not a threat," he said. He was quite sure, he told me, that a group of well-connected academics would write scathing reviews of my book (which none of them had yet seen) when it came out. As it turned out, I didn’t have to wait for the publication date. Within days, without anyone having read the book, what seemed to be a coordinated campaign against it began to unfold.

Managing Nature

{Audrey said} “It’s a bit ridiculous, really,” she said as she scanned the horizon through her binoculars. “We’re busy contracepting lions and elephants, and we’re not asking what the real problem is. There’s too many of us. There are too many people.”

But nobody discussed Audrey’s point. Nobody was talking about the human side of the equation. Perhaps this was because it didn’t seem particularly useful to do so. Nobody was going to promote culling people for the benefit of the ecosystem. But it was hard to deny that if we really wanted to do what was best for the elephants, the animals would not be confined to a fenced park such as Kruger, no matter how large the enclosure. Nor would they be expected to stay in an unfenced area, as at Gorongosa, just because humans had claimed the surrounding land. And they would not be transported hundreds of miles away to make a prettier, calmer herd for tourists.

Aside from worrying about population numbers, we don’t usually pay attention to what our new world has meant for elephants. In 2005, however, the scientist G. A. Bradshaw took a stab at the issue. In an essay published in the journal Nature, she suggested that human-elephant conflicts over the past century—war, culling, and habitat loss, among other ills—have disrupted the social fabric of elephants to the point that the species has become dysfunctional. She and her colleagues pointed to the misbehavior of the orphaned Kruger elephants, the skittishness of herds such as those in Gorongosa, and other examples of increased elephant angst to argue that the species seemed to be exhibiting a collective form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Essentially, they said, we might be witnessing the breakdown of the entire millennia-old elephant culture.

Local officials also told Heidi in 2008 that over the prior five years there had been a “dramatic increase” in alcoholism, prostitution, violent property crime, domestic violence, and HIV infection. This couldn’t all be blamed on the park restoration project, of course, but Heidi was of the mind that it certainly hadn’t helped. In any case, she believed that the communities surrounding Gorongosa Park had become not wealthier and healthier, as Greg had hoped they would when he began his work in central Mozambique, but hungrier, sicker, and poorer.

“Local farmers are not bad for biodiversity conservation in Gorongosa Park,” Heidi wrote in a public forum not long after the premiere of Africa’s Lost Eden. “They have long been, and seek to continue to be, its primary guardians.” Greg and the “high-handedness” of many of his efforts in the park, she continued, along with his unfamiliarity with the agricultural history of the region, were as much to blame as anything for the ecological destruction that “he and the media so loudly lament.”

To take the gloom even further, there is a lot of evidence that we, humans, are pushing the world toward this ultimate curtain call faster than ever. A growing number of scientists say that we have created a whole new geologic epoch, the Anthropocene: human behavior has so altered the planet that the changes are written in the earth itself. This is not presented as a good thing. Talk to people who study topics such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss—or water conservation.

I say "may" here, because it is quite possible that some parts of the world do not want us to interact with them at all. If we want to improve our global track record, we are going to need to accept this. We must reconsider our well-intentioned efforts to convince others that, as Greg Carr said on Mount Gorongosa, we are here to help. And we also need to stop assuming that the people who say "thanks but no thanks" just don't understand or aren't representative. Think, for a moment, about an analogy. A philanthropist from Singapore reads with horror some statistics about the American education system. He talks to some new friends he's made in the U.S. government—a bunch of Democrats, let's say—and takes up their invitation to tour the country's red states and look for a school system to take over. Eventually he picks Texas, or perhaps Alabama—somewhere that's been particularly troublesome for the Dems. The Democratic administration signs an executive order handing the Asian philanthropist can make the schools teach whatever he wants, in whatever style he desires. He can essentially write his own rules. The local population is furious, but to no avail. This is the best thing for them, the politicians in Washington say. After all, look at those standardized test scores—getting worse every year. The Singaporean press comes and writes glowing reports about how their philanthropist will repair the education system for poor Americans. It couldn't happen, right? If anything of the sort were tried, there would be mass protests and congressional hearings. And imagine the uproar once people realized that the Singaporean's foundation was collecting all the taxes earmarked for the state's education budget, to distribute however the philanthropist saw fit. Yet this is what we do all the time. It is the approach we take to the rest of the world, especially Africa.… Some highlights have been hidden or truncated due to export limits.

Western history of cultural dominance and by our benevolent finger snapping. In the case of conservation projects, it also draws on those same old tropes of unspoiled nature and exotic African wilderness. It is time for us to step back and recognize these stories for what they are, and realize how they must appear to those we tell, "We're here to help." I am not arguing here that we shouldn't be involved with the rest of the world at all, or that we shouldn't care for the nonhuman aspects of our planet, the animals and plants and air and water. I am saying that recognizing, and starting to understand, the alternative stories that people and places hold would allow us to approach the world from a much humbler perspective—and a far more effective… Some highlights have been hidden or truncated due to export limits.

Heidi found this out firsthand. Shortly after Greg read her posts, he contacted her and offered to fly her to Washington so they could talk about the issues face-to-face. It struck Heidi as an odd invitation, but she was ready to give the philanthropist the benefit of the doubt. She hoped that she might even convince him to readjust his project in a way that would better value the local farmers' perspectives. So she went to meet with him and ended up in what she describes as one of the strangest conversations of her life. "He was so angry," she told me. "He just kept bombarding me with the reasons for why they didn't need to get [the local] people's opinions." She had a hard time squeezing a word in, she says. Greg seemed far more interested in convincing her to embrace his opinion than he was in expanding the way he thought about his work in Mozambique.

And he seemed to grow increasingly angry as Heidi stuck to her own position. “He just kept saying, ‘Do you think it would actually be better if we weren’t there?’” Heidi didn’t understand why Greg was getting so worked up about persuading her—a relatively low-level academic with a limited audience—that what he was doing was right. “It was bizarre,” she recalled. “I’m like, ‘You’re a multimillionaire running this whole project. Why do you care what I think?’” But her story didn’t seem so bizarre to me. During the time I was reporting in Gorongosa, Greg often seemed mindful of how he’d be seen—in the academic world, in development and humanitarian circles, in history. He may have had the executive’s ability to be thick-skinned in matters of personnel management, but he seemed genuinely bothered, even hurt, if people in the realms he valued, such as academia or the arts, doubted the purity of his work. It wouldn’t surprise me if he wanted, or on some level even needed, to convince Heidi that she was wrong. She and the other academics, after all, were a threat to his story, the five-act play. But if he was bothered by these critics, Greg would soon get reassurance from a far more prominent voice: a famous scientist who would become one of the project’s most high-profile and influential supporters.

- Toll on an elephant that was being moved from one park to another

True to Carlos’s word, the convoy took on the feel of a funeral procession. We drove on sluggishly, fatigued by the blinding sunlight, the heat, the dust. All of a sudden, the whole operation felt to me like pure hubris and ignorance. It was so sweltering outside, so brutally bright, it seemed outrageous to have hoped that any creature—let alone a stressed-out and heavily drugged elephant—would survive hours of being strapped down onto a dark metal flatbed truck. It seemed a metaphor for everything: the underlying absurdity of our projects; the way we toy with nature and reorganize societies, be they human or animal; the truth underneath the stories we tell.

But again, there is another way to tell this story, and I wondered as I read the breathless press releases if any of the conservationists had stopped to think of the scene differently. A white man, who had never been to the country before (let alone the specific region), being deemed the person with the most authority to talk about creatures that had long existed in this African environment. A little uncomfortable, no?

But as I also tell my students, we have a responsibility, when we are purporting to explain the way things are, to put these individual stories into honest context. If there is only one Ohio resident out there working three jobs and unable to afford health care, then we as journalists need to make that clear. We should not let readers think that her story is representative. But what often happens—in my field as much as any other, unfortunately—is that we become so impressed by the single example that we don’t look at the big picture. We assume, and allow our readers to assume, that our one character’s experience is in some way typical of most.

[It] might sound, at first glance, as if the project were doing just fine. But think about that phrase, “partially met.” This is a standard category for our interventions in Africa, one employed regularly by the big donor organizations and conservation groups. It means things haven't gone as well as hoped, but they're not god-awful terrible. In this world, that somehow goes in the positive category. This doesn't work for most things in our lives. I wouldn't do very well if I partially met my mortgage payments or my article deadlines. I would not be thrilled if my husband partially met his wedding vows, or my kids partially met their homework assignments. Because, really, "partially met" means that you didn't do it.

That "yet," of course, is key. Much could still happen at Gorongosa. That is also part of its story. The same is true of our world overall, where we might yet find a way to save what biodiversity and clean air we have left. But if we want any real improvement, any real chance to avert the doom that seems to await us, then we need to start listening to all the voices, the full range of stories, rather than just the "partially met" fragments of our own play.

White Man's Game by Stephanie Hanes, MacMillan Publishers – to purchase, click here

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Something to think about

Let's make this relatively simple. List two issues related to the "good work" done by Greg Carr and other westerners in Mozambique that author Stephanie Hanes would like us to think about.

1.

2.