Shipembane, Hlahleni, Bangu and Tsumanene headwaters and found them all containing a surplus of water except the Tsumanene.

In 1898 Henri Berthoud's health was failing but, during the winter of that year, he undertook another journey that brought him to a famous site in the present day KNP — the place was worshipped by the local Black people and called Ríbye-ra-Gudzane. It is the deeply eroded and pot-holed seam of Karoo sandstone which crosses the Shingwedzi River at what is today known as Red Rocks. When passing this place of reverence the Blacks in those days prayed to their god, Khubyane and left offerings of snuff, meat or other tokens of esteem.

En route to his destination Henri Berthoud and his entourage crossed the Tshange and Kokodzi tributaries of the Shingwedzi and found them both as well as the Shingwedzi itself with clear running water. Today these rivers are all seasonal and only flow during the rainy season — and then only for short periods.

2.7 Hunters and their overnight outspans

After the establishment of the original Voortrekker towns and settlements in the Lowveld i.e. Ohrigstad (1845-1848), Schoemansdal (1849-1867), Krugerspos (1849) and Lydenburg (1850) and the expanding colonisation subsequent to the discovery of gold, the completion of the Eastern Railway and the establishment of towns such as Pilgrim's Rest (1873), Barberton and Kaapsche Hoop (1884), Hectorspruit, Kaap Muiden and Komatipoort (1892) and Nelspruit (1905), the hunting of game to obtain hides, meat and ivory became an important part of the economic wealth of the region.

The Lowveld in those days was known as the 'Whiteman's grave' because large areas were infested with mosquitoes (malaria) and tsetse fly (nagana) and hunting activities were limited to the dry winter months. The hunters preferred to camp in areas which were outside the tsetse belt. Well-known hunters in the southern part of the Lowveld, such as Sandeman, V. Kirby, the brothers Henry and Arthur Glyn, the Stolses, Abel Erasmus, “Farmer” Francis, Bill Sanderson, Harry Wolhuter, H.L. Hall and others, found the Pretoriuskop area extremely suitable for their extensive hunting expeditions.

They trekked to Pretoriuskop, where they established permanent camps at the many water pools which were to be found there in those years. From there they penetrated the eastern, tsetse-infested areas and hunted a variety of game. Lombaard (1969) recorded that in 1865 even President M.W. Pretorius went to Pretoriuskop to hunt and explore the region. and that the hill, in Lombaard's opinion, was named Pretoriuskop after the President.

Hunters from Schoemansdal and later Louis Trichardt, as well as from the notorious “Crooks Corner”, extensively hunted elephant *Loxodonta africana*, giraffe and other game in the northern parts of what is today the KNP, and gradually extirpated some of the species (a fate which overtook especially eland *Taurotragus oryx*, nyala *Tragelaphus angasii* and Lichtenstein's hartebeest *Alcelaphus lichtensteinii*). Well-known figures such as Hans Klopper and Bernard Lottering (or Lotrie) favoured Klopperfontein and Malonga to pitch their camps. In later years it was also the hunting ground of Fieldcornet Tom Kelly, Sarel Eloff, T.W. Fitzgerald, Cecil
‘Bvekenya’ Barnard, Ebersohn, Morty Ash, and others.

There were other hunters too (some of them unknown) who preferred to hunt in the central and central-northern parts of the Lowveld. The brothers Miles and Alec Bowker, Fred and Harry Barber, as well as Charlie White and Miller set up their favourite hunting camp at Bowkerskop where today, in winter, there is no surface water available. The same holds true for the hunting camps of the Jouberts (at Joubert’s grave) on the Shipikane, and unknown hunting parties who, in the 1870s and 1880s camped along the Nalatsi Spruit some two kilometres south of the Timatoro-windmill, and on the upper reaches of the Mbanzweni Spruit, where ex-Game Ranger T. Mollentze, found an old fourpounder elephant rifle in a rock crevice in the Lebombos.

The Letaba-Olifants confluence was favoured by elephant hunters such as Tom Kelly and the Glynns, though the names of H.M. Borter (July 1890) and Briscoe (1890) are also carved in old baobab trees. There was no water shortage in these localities, although one wonders about the location of the water source in the Sweni where “RWB” or “AWB” ‘91’ was incised on the rock of a sandstone kopjie three kilometres to the west of the Satara-Skukuza main road. (It could have been Alec Bowker.) There is similar speculation about a hunter’s camp that Senior Game Ranger M.C. Mostert recently found on the upper reaches of the Komapite Spruit south of Ship Mountain.

Fortunately some of the better-known hunters from the era before the Anglo-Boer War produced written documentation in which their hunting experiences, water conditions, game numbers and distribution in various hunting areas are accurately recorded.

Henry T. Glynn (ca 1926) related the following incidents dating from 1876-1877 in his book “Game and Gold”: “Early one morning we saddled up and went in search of the much coveted game — eland. We had ridden some distance when we suddenly espied a troop of about two hundred on a high hill”. (This incident took place in the Pretoriuskop area. They shot altogether eight eland from that herd and probably wounded many more.) “On another occasion we were riding out near Legogot and saw a large troop of game. We could not make out what they were at first, but we galloped on and found them to be a troop of elands”. (They quickly shot six from this herd too.) “On the Pretoriuskop flats not far from White River in following a troop of brindled gnu, one might come onto a second troop, and a third then vast herds of zebra and some sessaby, and then more wildebeest and sessaby pouring down from every quarter, until the landscape presented the appearance of a moving mass of game of anything up to about 5 000 in number”.

To support such vast herds of game during the winter months, the veld must have been much better watered than at present. Even the water holes in the Nsikazi and Faai spruits dry up during times of severe drought (as in 1970) and in similar circumstances the water sources are hardly sufficient for more than a few hundred head of game, let alone thousands!

Glynn related that “In hunting in the Transvaal in the low country, extending to the Lebombo mountains, I came across several small streams that carry
some hippo between the Sabie and Olifants rivers. The Wanetsi river is one, and the hippo travel back and forth from the Portuguese territory”.

E.F. Sandeman (1880) recounted his experiences in the Pretoriuskop area and east of it during June-August 1878, in his book “Eight months in an Ox-Waggon”. “Long Kop, or Saddle-back Kop (Ship Mountain), was now only five to six miles away, and we were told the boundary of the terrible tsetse fly ran along the base of it from north to south. There was a very bad supply of water where we outspanned, and the grass was not especially good, so we determined to trek about three miles to the south-east of Pretoriuskop, where we discovered two deep waterholes (probably the Faiy water holes) and good pasturage, before making our permanent camp. Within a stone’s throw lay the footpath used by the Blacks on their way to and from the diamond or gold fields, and by all going to Delagoa Bay from the Transvaal.”

“For nearly eight miles we followed the tracks towards Delagoa Bay, and were soon at the far end of Long Kop (Ship Mountain). The bush from this point becomes much thicker, and the general aspect of the country grew wilder and more densely wooded. We went on the path for another five miles before we caught up with Woodward, who waited for us at a place known far and near as Hart’s station; once a small but comfortable log-hut, with a small garden around it, but now only a few broken-down walls, and a mass of cinders. The place had a very gruesome appearance, which the tragic tale connected with it helped to foster.”

Thomas Hart, a young man of 22, was overpowered and shot through the head by a band of Chief Maripe’s Black robbers on the evening of 10 August 1876. This incident, and other murders and raids, led to the first Sekhukhuni War of 1876-1877. “Here was the first water we had come across. The little stream (Josikhulu) was quite dried up, but following it down some distance and then turning up another smaller stream also dried up, which led into it, one of the boys brought us to a pool of water left in a deep hole worn into the rock, and shaded from the sun by another large overhanging ledge which prevented evaporation.” Today there is no sign of water during the dry winter months in this area.

“For some three miles further we kept along the footpath, and then Woodward, under whose direction we moved, turned off to the left at almost right angles. We took as our guiding beacon a high peak of rock which showed up clear from a low range of broken up hillocks (Makhuthwanini). As it was, we did not see a living thing, and although we put off making our camp for the night as late as possible, we discovered a small hole of clear water between two high rocks, which lay in a bed of a now dry stream.” (Possibly the Mtlowa Spruit.) “Before we had gone many miles along our new course, the nature of the country changed. The trees gave way to thorns again, and short crisp grass took the place of the long tufts we had hitherto been walking through.” Compare the brackish flats along the lower reaches of the Ntomeni Spruit. “The boys grew more hopeful and quickened the pace of their own accord. Soon we came across some fresh spoor of impala, going in the same direction as ourselves, and a mile further on we came upon quite a large pool of sweet clear water.” At present the Ntomeni Spruit dries up completely during the dry season.
“Just as we succeeded in lighting a fire, the long-collected storm burst upon us...” (in the middle of winter), “...and poured down a pelting, pitiless deluge, which soon put our fires out and made us take refuge in the small tent...”

“We made our camp for the night by the only good water we had tasted for a couple of months, and there was almost an unlimited supply of it.” According to Sandeman’s description of the terrain, he could have been referring to the Hlambanyati-Mbyamiti confluence. “It was discovered more by chance than anything else as none of the boys had any knowledge of our present neighbourhood. Several acres of water were covered thickly with large rugged rocks, piled up one above the other. On the chance of coming across a panther or lion, we were climbing over them, and in the centre came upon a little open sandy space, on two sides of which, deep down to the foundation of the rocks, were two clear pools of water, one not less than six feet deep and evidently supplied by a spring.” The surface area of the water described here is as large as most of our smaller dams.

F. Vaughan Kirby (1896), who hunted in the southern part of the Transvaal Lowveld, in later years became a renowned nature conservation officer. He was eventually appointed as the first Warden of the Hluhluwe Reserve in Natal. In his book “In Haunts of Wild Game” he described his hunting experiences in the Lowveld during the years 1893-1896. He often referred to the distribution of water in the area between the Olibants and Crocodile rivers. Some of these references will be quoted because in the case of most of the places described by him, there are now few signs of water in the dry season. Some of the conditions described by him (especially in the Nwanezana-Sweni-Mavumbe-Gudzane area) occurred temporarily during the years which had particularly prolific rainfalls i.e. from 1971 to 1978.

“Our waggons stand outspanned on the edge of a small clearing in the otherwise low but thick bush on the north side of the Manzimonti river, and from a comfortable camp, with good water within 100 yards, and near the long stretches of young sweet grass, which has sprung up since the February ‘burns’. About 200 yards distant a small stone kopje, rising out of the surrounding bush, forms a remarkable feature of the landscape. It is the lowest of the straggling group comprising the Eland kopjes — thus called for the elands, which but a few years ago were to be found in considerable numbers in the vicinity.” According to his excellent map they must have camped near the present Nwaswitsonsso koppies on the western boundary and on the uppermost reaches of the Mthlwa Spruit, an upper stretch of the Nwaswitsonsso. Today no water is to be found there in winter.

“I cannot say whether wildebeeste are able to swim, for I never saw them trying to cross deep water, but once I witnessed a singular incident, which at the time led me to think they could not do so.”

“I was hunting on foot near the junction of the Mjindana (Shikelenkane) and Mabutsha (Mavumbye) rivers, and having hit a good koodoo bull hard, had followed him into an extensive ‘gwarra’ thicket, where I lost the spoor amongst the numerous tracks of game. Catching sight of an animal standing in the thicket, the nature of which neither I or my boy could determine, I fired at it. It dashed off, and we followed the spoor, evidently that of a big
wildebeest bull: it led us to the edge of a deep pool, 300 yards long by about 25 yards wide, with 10 feet-high banks. I saw the wildebeest in the water, apparently drowning.” The surface area of this waterhole is equalled by very few of our present dams.

“One Sunday evening, about nine p.m., two boys who had been down to the junction of the Mabutsha (Mavumbye) and Mjindana (Shikelenkane), returned with the news that a hippopotamus was in a large hole near that place and distant about ten miles.”

“The stream narrowed here to a breadth of less than a dozen yards, flowing swiftly over a stony bottom; but a few yards above was an enormous pool — or hippo hole, as they called it — fully a mile in length and as deep for aught I know, and alive with crocodiles. A deadly-looking place with great waterlilies covering its surface scum.” This could possibly be the Ndumbane Waterhole which in those years was as large in circumference as most of our larger dams.

“At length we turned our faces westwards towards the Nguanetsi at which river we found Messrs. Barber and Bowker camped; and they showed me a very remarkable specimen of an albino reeduck, a young ram, which one of their party had shot higher up the river.”

“On August 18 we crossed our old drift on the Manzimonti and outspanned, and in the afternoon trekked on again along the course of the river by an old native footpath, and about five p.m. outspanned on the south bank near a large waterhole, and within a mile of the junction — upon the other side — of the Malau and the larger river.” It must have been in the vicinity of the Misane mouth where today water is supplied by a windmill.

“The grass on that side of the river opposite our camp being very dry, we fired it at all points as we went along. It is never advisable to leave too much grass cover round a camp in lion country, and besides, burnt ground is a great assistance in spooring. Torrents of rain fell during the night, accompanied by thunder and most vivid lightning.”

“I had killed a wildebeest bull for bait, which for three days had failed to attract them (the lions); but seeing some fresh spoor on the banks of a stream, the Lion river, a tributary of the Vimbangwenya (Ngotsa) — where lions had been twice to drink...”

“At length the spoor (of a lion) which hitherto had run parallel with, and about 80 yards distant from the bank of the stream (Ngotsa), turning towards it. Right at the water’s edge we held the dogs fast...”

“On one occasion I was walking along the banks of the Makanbana (near Satara) at a spot where the reeds were very dense and a lion jumped out of those...” Similar circumstances repeated themselves on the Kambane Spruit during the years of copious rain i.e. 1971 to 1978.

“My friend F and I were shooting during that season in partnership and we made our headquarters at my old ‘wildcat camp’, near the junction of the Mabutsha (Mavumbye) and Manungu (Gudzane) rivers, tributaries of the Nguanetsi”. This must have been near the Shikwenbu Waterhole in the Mavumbye. At present this waterhole dries up in winter.

“On the 5th July I did not fire at any of the game seen along the way, my
object being only to secure something for bait, at or near Simana kopjes (Ngirivane), as it seemed probable the lions were lying up in some of the dense and extensive patches of cover on the Simana river. About midday we off saddled close to a considerable pan near the kopjes...” (it was probably the Chuwini Pan) “…containing delightfully cool and — what was indeed a treat in that country, where all the water is brackish, not to say salt — fresh water”.

2.8 Von Wielligh and Vos survey border between Moçambique and the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek

In 1890 the Surveyor-General of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (Z.A.R.), G.R. von Wielligh, was commissioned to survey the border between the Transvaal and Moçambique in co-operation with two Portuguese surveyors, Machado and Andrada. Members of Von Wielligh’s party included his assistant, Surveyor W. Vos, and Abel Erasmus, the well-known Bantu Commissioner of Krugerspos.

During the period 6th May to 5th August 1890 Vos kept a diary in which he made numerous references to the topography, vegetation, fauna, water distribution and human habitation along the length of the Lebombo between the Crocodile-Komati confluence and Shingwedzi Poort.

A number of diary entries are given below.

“6th May 1890 Scenery from Barberton to Louws Creek something grand. Abundance of water.

7th June Went up mountain to Beacon B and from there proceeded on watershed to northern direction where camp had been shifted. At 10 o’clock a nasty drizzle fell and continued until we reached camp. Camp shifted about 6 miles. Water very bad here and are told by Kaffirs we will find no water until we reach Sabie river about 18 miles off.

13th June Sabie river about 200 yards wide, very low at present. Seems to run very sluggishly. Sabie passes through a narrow poort. Mountain precipitous on bank; numerous spruits without water at present.

19th June Struck camp early morning (heavy fog) and proceeded north to camp 7 close to Nondooiti river (Mlondozi) where we found a small kaffir kraal. Had a good run after hartebeest and shot four.

21st June After erecting Beacon F struck camp and proceeded north along eastern edge of Moondja (Muntshe) a ridge of about 700 ft and three miles long. About a mile from Moondja (Muntshe) struck Nondooiti (Mlondozi) river where we camped (No. 8) near to kaffir kraal. River runs along western slope of Moondja (Muntshe) and curves around mountain. Runs S.E. and flows into Sabie close to Poort. At present very little running water, but has numerous deep pools covered with nymphae, and banks with large palms, and grand fern (fever) trees on banks. Grass very close and about 2½ to 3 ft. high. Kaffirs cultivate beans (3 varieties), mealies and manna.
22nd June  In camp north of Moondja (Muntshe). Old boy went out water hunting and came back later. Water about nine miles off (Munweni).

23rd June  Morning went to erect beacon in mountain (Munweni Beacon). I went chasing after hartebeest and shot one. Whilst racing after waterbuck found young crocodile in spruit which skidded like fun.

24th June  Struck camp and proceeded north to river close to kaaffirs kraal (Nkuane). Big kraal at this point. Came across fine troop of sable antelope.

25th June  Struck camp and proceeded NNE and after travelling about 9 miles came to another kaaffir kraal where we camped. Crossed one spruit and then came along south bank of Masintonto (Nwaswitsonto) river. River runs S and then goes through Lebombs into Portuguese territory. Reached Mitsembiu (Metsi-Metsi) running south and joins Masintonto in Lebombo. Waggons stuck in river and have not reached us yet.

26th June  Camp at Mitsimetsi. Morning went up Lebombo to erect beacon.

27th June  Left camp at Mitsimetsi. Proceeded about 9 miles and came to small spruit (Hlangulene) where we camped. First time I have gone out and not come across game.

25th June  Struck camp and proceeded north. Travelled along footpath leading to Magebain’s kraal and came to a river with large zeekoegaten with running water (Makonkolweni). In one laagte came across some fine black thorn trees and we camped under large ebony tree. After passing Metsi-metsi running south a high bult from which water runs north and joins near mountain, then runs through mountain. River not marked on map. (Mbhadzi).

29th June  In camp No. 13 on banks of running water (Sweni). Abel Erasmus had letter from H. Glynn who had crossed the Lebombo; has had good sport — shot 60 head already.

30th June  Shifted camp. Found footpath for few hundred yards and struck north, passed two rivers and we camped on banks of another. In afternoon A. Erasmus sent kaaffir back to bring dynamite as they had seen some seacow. River in Lebombo mountain (Nwanedzi). We commence bombarding lagoon and seacow showed himself. I was surprised to find such a fine river in between range.

1st July  In camp. Went up mountain to erect Beacon (I) on banks of Mivanetsi (Nwanedzi) river where it runs through the mountain.

3rd July  Shifted camp and went to Magebain’s Kraal which we reached in 2½ hours at a small spruit (Gudzane or Shikelenkane).
Large gardens with huts in dense bush.

4th July Camped at Magebain’s. Morning went up mountain to erect Beacon (J). Von Wielligh went NE to Lebombo and came across elephant spours. On mountain large numbers of kaffirs living in a dense undergrowth (Pumbe).

5th July Left Magebain’s kraal and travelled NNW. About 4 miles from camp we reached water (?Mbadzane) and then travelled on and could find no water so had to trek 4½ hours before we reached water (Ngotsa or Shipembane). Here we crossed footpath coming from Mujaji and crosses the Lebombas to Delagoa Bay” (cf. Map of old trade routes compiled by De Vaal). “Same one as Berthoud travelled on. Water scarce, camped here. Kaffirs informed us that there are hunters at Zimbabati (Timbavati) who had shot lots of seacow. Make enquiries about footpath and found it crosses Lebombo (at Pumbe) to Delagoa, and goes NW crosses Olifants river at Timbabato thence to Mujaji.

7th July Left camp morning and followed footpath up Lebombo where beacon was erected at small pan. (Pumbe Pan, Beacon K). Numerous kaffirs living in mountains. Lebombo a large plateau thickly covered with trees resembling pomegranites. (Sandveld vegetation).

8th July Shifted camp and intended to proceed to Olifants river, but kaffirs got away too late, so we camped some distance from river at a small spruit (Bangu), afterwards went up mountain. Found it very broken to the north. Close to river an enormous tract of bush resembling olive trees (Msimbit). Dory found kraal quite deserted by kaffirs, with lots of mealies, fowls, dogs about.

9th July Shifted camp to Olifants. River running down E between precipitous banks. Two crocodiles were swimming about in lagoon. L. and self walked along river, found Letaba joining it at foot of Poort. At junction, two rivers run through a very narrow poort, no more than 30 feet wide, where it runs through a very narrow poort, resembling a gutter. Really a magnificent sight, on both sides of mountain with precipitous sides, about perpendicular down below as if cut out of rock, a narrow canal in which river runs, with banks of rock as smooth as possible. On every bit of sand numerous crocodile tracks. Found a number of wild dogs chasing a waterbuck.

10th July Crossed Olifants river on foot, river came down during night, current very strong (July). Had great difficulty keeping footing. Camped under an enormous baobab tree — 53 feet in circumference. A giant. (This tree can still be seen today and the names of many former hunters, inter alia the Glyns are carved on its bole.) Boys picked up two elephant tusks. Spoores of elephant about. Lions plentiful.
11th July  Morning crossed the Letaba river. *River very strong*, and as the stones are all water-washed, found great difficulty in crossing. After crossing we came suddenly on to a large lagoon, on edge of which seacow was lying (floodpan on northbank of Letaba at confluence). Close to lagoon kaffirs found complete carcass of elephant. The tusks were in splendid state of preservation.

12th July  Erected Beacon L on north bank of river. *Drove pegs into Baobab tree*, and got to top, find it quite hollow but not rotten. (These pegs are still to be seen on the tree).

15th July  Struck camp at Olifants river, and proceeded along banks of Letaba about 8 miles, and camped under large Baobab (Von Wielligh tree). Camp No. 20. Country after passing Olifants river seems to be changing, different class of trees growing (mopani). Country more broken, seems to be a spur of the mountain. Very stony and *well watered*. Letaba itself broad and covered with a forest of pampas reeds on sides, magnificent dark foliage trees (Nkuhlu's). Looking towards river we saw a large troop of waterbuck running towards us.

17th July  Von Wielligh and A. Erasmus crossed Letaba to erect Beacon M (at Ramiti Pan). Morning wind suddenly changed round to SE and fanned grass fire which burned with great rapidity and almost burnt out camp. Flame spread over enormous track of country. Roaming clouds began to gather and showed *signs of rain*.

18th July  *During night it rained a great deal*. Morning still raining. When weather cleared we broke camp. We proceeded to Letaba river and camped close to kaffir kraals. Makoror kaffirs belonging to Shoshangaan's son Umzila, who will probably give us trouble. (Vos was mistaken here. Umzila (Muzila) died in 1885 and had been succeeded by his son, Gungunyane).

19th July  Left camp at Letaba, crossed river and found good sandy drift. *River in places rather deep*. Afternoon left Letaba and struck north. When we had gone about 1½ hours, commenced to look for water without success. Walking a little distance further, we found a *running stream*, but water bad. (Makhadzi). Afterwards walked up side of Lebombo, and had a view of surrounding dead flat country. Two grand koppies about 20 miles off (Mesorini and Shikumbu) in direction of Palabora. Grass burnt down for miles. One of Andrada's donkeys was drowned trying to swim across the Letaba.

21st July  In Camp 22. Morning E. went up mountain to erect Beacon (N — Tabandlopfu).

22nd July  Shifted camp and after 2½ hours found a small pool of water where we camped. On way we crossed a large footpath
crossing Lebombo. (This footpath was used in later years by the WNLA-recruits who walked to Letaba). Am told it goes to Bemba (Limpopo). Traces of civilization found in shape of a bottle and tracks of a cart.

23rd July Went up mountain to erect beacons. (O & P. Ncindweni and Greone).

24th July Shifted camp today. Proceeded for about 3½ hours. We crossed dead flat country. Found fair amount of water in a watercourse near Lebombsos. (Shilowa). Make camp.


26th July Morning early went up mountain to erect Beacon. (Beacon Q — Shilowa). Near top we found some deserted huts, and some skeletons. A large number of kaffirs must have lived here, as the whole mountain must have been thickly inhabited. Kaffirs say Makoror tribe murdered probably by Gungunyanes's impis.

26th July Proceed about 3 miles and went up peak to erect another Beacon (Beacon R, Shibyatsangela), and from there proceeded to camp No. 25 at a tributary of the Shingwedzi river. Running water. (Nyavutsi). Formation changed to granite (sic) with layers of lime and blue rock resembling Kimberley blue. Erasmus in terrible hurry.

27th July Morning Andrada fished some holes with dynamite. Large number of fish killed.

28th July Morning party went up mountain to erect Beacon (S — Kostine). We are indeed in the tropics. Numerous Palms and other tropical plants. Water very brackish in all the spruits. The place is thick with fly. Palms bearing fruit like small coconuts in abundance. Some about 20 feet high. Country parched and game scarce. Reached Shingwedzi river. It is a very wide river, covered with pampas reeds, but at present having very little running water.

30th July Went up mountain to erect last Beacon of Sura Chucundo (sic) (T at Gonde-gonde). Do not think we can proceed further as our kaffirs are starving.

31st July Decided to abandon trip and return. Kaffirs inform us that Gungunyane had killed all the kaffirs to the junction of Pafuri and Limpopo rivers and we will find no kraal (or food) between here and Limpopo.

3rd August Struck camp and proceeded West so as to strike the Letaba. Proceeded towards Palabora and came to a spruit called Gras spruit (Shawu valley). Found a boer camp here. Crossed Isinde (Tsende) river and camped here. Water scarce but got some by digging.
4th August

Left camp and proceeded SW and after four hours reached Letaba river. Crossed it and camped at side of a spruit. Here we came across a waggon track (hunters again). We found their camp where they had shot a lot of game.

5th August

1890

Reached Palabora."

2.9 Location of the transport route through the southern Lowveld, and establishment of trading posts in the area.

From the beginning it was the intention of the Voortrekkers to engage in trade relations with the Portuguese at the harbour of Delagoa Bay, and to establish a suitable trade route from the coast to the interior. In 1843 an expedition led by Karel Trichardt departed from Winburg in the Orange Free State for Delagoa Bay but was halted by the Olifants River which was in flood. Some six months later (in 1844) a commission led by General Andries Potgieter left Potchefstroom with the same purpose and reached Delagoa Bay. It has been ascertained that Karel Trichardt was requested to accompany the expedition as interpreter, but did not do so.

On the 8th October 1845, the Volksraad at Ohrigstad (near Lydenburg) sent a commission to Delagoa Bay. The expedition comprised 26 men, and departed on the 14th October. Karel Trichardt was the guide and interpreter. It is assumed that the expedition followed the route north of the Mbyamiti via the present Kwaggaspan and Renosterkoppies, and Godleni neck to Delagoa Bay. (On later maps of the region that particular road was indicated as "De Oude Wagenweg" i.e. (The Old Wagon Road)).

On the 14th January 1847, Albasini, the Portuguese trader, told the Volksraad in Ohrigstad that he had discovered an alternative route to Delagoa Bay. Albasini alleged that his route did not pass through the dreaded tsetse fly area. (The route was almost certainly the ancient trade road from Magashula's Kraal via Ship Mountain and Josikhulu which was used by Albasini’s own carriers to transport trade goods into the interior, but it was not completely free of tsetse flies.) Albasini suggested that an expedition explore the route and the Volksraad decided that the expedition could set out on the 20th May. However, it left on the 5th or 6th June to enable 200 Potchefstroom citizens to accompany them. The expedition did not complete their journey as the fort in Delagoa Bay was besieged by a large force of hostile Blacks (Panda’s Zulus). A smaller expedition, led by J. van Rensburg, was sent to Delagoa Bay on the 12th July, and on its return on 16th December reported favourably to the Volksraad.

It transpired that Karel Trichardt had played a prominent role in either that particular expedition or a subsequent one which was undertaken during 1848. The expeditions succeeded in establishing a route that in later years became the main connecting route (transport road) between the Z.A.R. and Delagoa Bay. One of the members of the 1848 expedition, Willem Pretorius, became ill during the journey and was sent back accompanied by a few Blacks. He died under a marula tree near Pretoriuskop and was buried by Albasini.

It is assumed that Pretoriuskop was named after Willem Pretorius and not
after President M.W. Pretorius, who visited the area in 1865. De Oude Wagenweg was not generally used as the connecting road between Delagoa Bay and Ohrigstad because water for the trek animals was virtually unobtainable during the winter months.

On the 7th March, 1849, the Volksraad at Ohrigstad decided that the road to Delagoa Bay should be opened in May. In May 1850 the Volksraad elected Karel Trichardt to lead a delegation to Lourenço Marques (Delagoa Bay) to conclude a trading agreement with the Portuguese. He entered into another agreement with the Portuguese regarding the border between the Z.A.R. and the Portuguese region. These decisions were later confirmed by the Volksraad. It is recorded in the archives that the Portuguese Governor, D’Andrade, wanted the Drakensberg range to form the border between the two regions. However, Karel Trichardt successfully argued that the Lebombo had to be the border, for the Boers would be closer to the harbour, something that would benefit large-scale trading.

By concluding such an agreement Karel Trichardt managed to incorporate the whole area, which today covers the KNP, in the territory of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. If his arguments had been rejected there would have been no national park as it exists today. The following year Karel Trichardt invited D’Andrade to visit the Volksraad at Lydenburg where the trade and border agreements were confirmed. Krüger (1938) alleges that the Portuguese Government did not consider the treaty as valid because it was not sanctioned by the Governor of Moçambique. It is illuminating that during the ultimate determination of the border in 1890, the parties involved agreed that the Lebombo would form the border between the Portuguese territory and the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek.

After the discovery of gold in the Spitskop, Mac-Mac and Pilgrim’s Rest areas in 1873, President Thomas Burgers realised that a suitable trade route between the eastern Transvaal goldfields and Delagoa Bay had become a necessity.

In 1875, a Hungarian engineer, trader and adventurer, Alois Hugo Nellmapius, offered to open a new trade route and maintain it. His offer was readily accepted by the Volksraad and on the 18th May 1875 the contract for the project was allotted to the “Lourenço Marques and South African Transport Service”. Nellmapius diligently started building the road. It began at the Lydenburg goldfields and ran via Spitskop to Burgershall. From there it went through Pretoriuskop, Joubertshoop, Ludwigslust, Coopersdal and Castilhopolis (all were farms that he received as compensation from the Zuid-Afrikaansche Government). The route then passed over the Lebombo at Mathalaaport and proceeded to Progresso de Guedes, Campos de Corvo, and thence to Lourenço Marques. Nellmapius established overnight facilities (under White supervision) at all the stations along the road, which was in effect, the same route that had been used for centuries as a trade route by the Black tribes in the interior. The route had been explored in 1848-1850 by Karel Trichardt. At Pretoriuskop a Dane, Feldshau, was put in command. Thomas Hart was posted at Joubertshoop (Albasini’s old Josikhulu post), and at Ludwigslust on the southern bank of Nellmapius Drift across the Crocodile River. Dr. J. Birch was put in command. The “station master” at
Coopersdal was Dr. H. Pearce. At Castilhopolis, in the Lebomos, W. Boby was in command, and R. Lempke was the supervisor at Progresso de Guedes in Moçambique. The last station before reaching Lourenço Marques, Campos de Corvo, was under the command of Nellmapius' trading partner, Alberto Carlos de Paiva Rapoza.

Nellmapius' intention was that Black carriers (each carrying up to 50 pounds weight) would carry goods at a remuneration of 5/- each for the entire distance through the tsetse area from Lourenço Marques to Pretoriuskop. From there the goods would be transported to the goldfields by ox wagon. His overnight stations (more or less 15 km apart) had to be situated near perennial waters. The station masters were expected to cultivate vegetables and mealies to provide the carriers with fresh food. There also had to be sufficient drinking water for men and animals. At the two stations in the KNP (Pretoriuskop and Joubertshoop, Thomas Hart's station) conditions were favourable in 1875.

A certain William Napier walked from Lydenburg to Delagoa Bay in December 1875 and January 1876 and his experiences at Pretoriuskop and Hart's overnight station are described in Dunbar (1881):

"31st December 1875 — Early in the forenoon I arrived at Nellmapius station of Pretoriuskop, very tired, hot, empty and thirsty, and only too glad to have a long day's rest with the active and experienced manager, Mr. Feldshau, a Dane, hitherto in the service of Mr. Nellmapius on the Gold fields. He was at work in his garden as I walked up to the door, and received me kindly. Looking back at the entire line of country, from the base of the Berg, a distance of some 30 miles, it is difficult to conceive a better farming country, or one more adapted to English or other European settlers. Health, water, wood and timber, soil here richer for more tropical cultivation, there more suited to grain crops, wheat, etc.

After a wash and breakfast, Mr Feldshau took me to his farm. He has about 130 English acres under cultivation, in several patches of which are mealies, buckwheat, pumpkins etc. The summer rains should have commenced in November and here is the end of the year without more than a passing shower. This fine farm which has its greatest length on the line of the road to Joubert's Hoop is essentially adapted for the pasture of large herds of cattle. In the evening I had a nice bath in a small pool which is full of barbel. (Clarias gariepinus (Burchell)).

1st January 1876 — The station of Joubert's Hoop is placed in a slight depression of the surrounding country, but the spot is still high enough to be healthy, and the scrub having been cut out, the fine trees remaining give quite a homely, pleasant aspect to the location. Mr Hart, the master, quite a young man, received me pleasantly in a tent, for his house is not finished. Having had a rest, I went with him to look at the patch of ground he is planting with mealies in anticipation of the rains, which are late this year. The marshy spots may be tried for rice.

2nd January 1876 — Having had a refreshing bath last evening in a waterhole near Mr. Hart's station, and in which I had again to submit to the curiosity of the fish, I dined with Mr. Hart.
Leaving Joubert’s Hoop for the Crocodile river. The distance is said to be seventeen miles, but I think it is nearer twenty miles.

The path runs S.E. by the compass, and making for a point equidistant between two koppies (Makhuthwanini and Rooikop), some six miles distant, the land rises and falls, with spruits at this season nearly quite dry, running towards the Sabie*. Something more than half way to the Crocodile from Joubert’s Hoop, a Kaffir hunter’s kraal (Fihlamanzi) is passed, and the path continues over an ever flattening country, with a more open vista in both directions, the scrub becomes lower, and isolated large trees beautifying the landscape.” (The scenery is the same today).

Nellmapius’ trade route had just started functioning properly when the first Sekhukhuni insurrections commenced in May 1876. Unfortunately Hart was one of the first victims of Chief Maripe’s (an ally of Sekhukhuni’s) robber bands and was murdered treacherously on 10th August 1876 at his station by a band of Maripe’s warriors. The supervisor of the Campos de Corvo, Albertos Rapoza, was also murdered and the other “station commanders” were withdrawn to Pilgrim’s Rest and Lydenburg for their own safety.

The first Sekhukhuni War was ended through the mediation of the Reverend Merensky in January 1877, but on account of President Burgers’ halfhearted endeavours to subject the Bapedi tyrant, further confrontations with the Blacks in the area soon followed. All traffic between the Lydenburg goldfields and Delagoa Bay came to a halt. Sir Theophilus Shepstone annexed the Transvaal on the 12th April 1877, and on the 4th March 1879 Sir Owen Lanyon was appointed Administrator of the Transvaal. By that time it was clear that serious trouble was once again brewing, instigated by Sekhukhuni and his subordinate chiefs, among them Maripe, Mapog and Umsutu. Lanyon was unable to handle the situation, nor could he get along with the Boers.

After the Anglo-Zulu wars and the subjection of Cetswayo, the Zulu Chieftain in Natal, British troops under the command of the experienced Sir Garnet Wolseley were sent to suppress the second Sekhukhuni rising. With the help of 8 000 Swazi warriors under the command of their warrior general Matafin (who was later assassinated in the park), Sekhukhuni’s mountain fortress was conquered, and three days later he and his indunas were taken prisoner by Captains Owen and Ferreira, and sent to the Pretoria prison.

The Boers were not pleased with the British annexation of Transvaal and they regained their freedom during the First War of Independence with victories over the British forces at Bronkhorstspruit (20th December 1880), Laing’s Nek (27th January 1881), Ngogo (8th February 1881), and Amajuba, where Gen. George Pomeroy Colley was decisively defeated on the 27th February 1881. Colley and 92 of his troops died during the battle. On the 21st March Sir Evelyn Wood concluded a peace treaty with acting President S.J.P. Kruger, and the Z.A.R. regained its freedom.

After these vicissitudes the trade traffic between the Transvaal and Delagoa Bay could be carried on for the first time in an organised manner. However,

*Napier mistook the Mbyamiti River for the Sabie.*
the wars resulted in Nellmapius’ “Lourenço Marques and South African Transport Service” becoming bankrupt, and the transport riders themselves had to improve the old transport route and make it passable for ox wagons. It was also imperative to devise some way to minimize tsetse fly attacks on their trek animals. The hardy pioneers mastered all these problems, and along the later KNP section of the old transport road they selected new outspan where there was sufficient water for man and beast. The new outspan which were put into service were Fihlamanzi (the hidden water), the Ntomene waterholes at the present Voortrekker-windmill, and waterholes at the foot of Ship Mountain (such as Samarhole) where Jock of the Bushveld, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick’s famous dog was born in May 1885. It was here also that the German Adolf Soltké, mutilated his leg with a shotgun and was buried by Fitzpatrick’s company. The entry in Fitzpatrick’s diary for the 8th July reads: “On Thursday 2nd July we reached Intomane (Ntomene waterholes) and stayed there all day. Friday we reached Ship Mountain and rested and stayed a day or two.”

The transport wagon traffic increased in intensity and number and reached a peak in 1882-1892. In 1892 the Pretoria-Delagoa Bay railway line was completed and the old transport route through the park gradually became obsolete.

That the area through which the transport road ran during that time (1882-1892) was much more plentifully supplied with water than at present, is obvious. This is confirmed by an old transport rider, Mr J.G. Basson who, in 1950, accompanied Dr. W. Punt along the old route. Their party also included Mr. I.C. Holtzhausen of Barberton, a former police officer in the old Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. Holtzhausen had been stationed in Komatipoort from the 26th March 1898 until the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 and in those days he was also to act as part time game ranger in the old Sabi Reserve.

Basson was a transport rider who used the route through the later KNP from 1883 to 1885. According to him the road that Nellmapius opened up in 1875-1876 roughly follows the present tourist road between Pretoriuskop and Malelane. In his opinion, however, the old road in the region of Ship Mountain lay 0.8 km to 3.2 km to the north of the present tourist road. (This was recently confirmed by Senior Game Ranger M.C. Mostert.) The following remarks made by Basson are of interest:

(i) In 1883-1885 eland and oribi *Ourebia ourebi* could be seen at Shabenkop. Holtzhausen confirmed these observations. 

(ii) The Pretoriuskop area was frequented by many lions and he (Basson) and the Stolles, who camped there, often hunted lion. (One of the Stolles died of a heart attack after a lion hunt, and was buried at the foot of the Manungu Hill.) Lions were most abundant in the area between the Crocodile and Komati rivers.

(iii) Basson opined that the slopes of Pretoriuskop were more densely covered in vegetation than in the 1950s. He found the grass generally sparse. The scarcity of bushveld grass (buffalo grass?) was conspicuous. When he saw Nellmapiusdrift he remarked that 67 years before, the Crocodile had been an open stream bordered by sand banks. In 1950 it was overgrown with reeds.
The vegetation in the area some 16 km east of Josikhulu Spruit was the same knobthorn veld that was to be seen in 1883 and showed no change.

(iv) Basson was of the opinion that the whole area between Barberton and the Lebomboos was considerably drier than 70 years previously (1950 was in a wet cycle). Seventy years before, at Pretoriuskop, the bulrush swamps and pools between the kopje and the camp contained a lot of water. The outspan there was favoured by all travellers. In those days the Ntomene waterholes were also a sought-after outspan as well as a drinking place for buffalo.

(v) Henry Wolhuter reported that the Blacks told him that the Josikhulu Spruit southeast of Ship Mountain had long ago been a trading post of Albasini.

This information, according to Dr. Punt, is important, for it seems that a trade route existed between Delagoa Bay and the interior, on which were established the outposts of Albasini at Josikhulu and Manungu. The so-called Delagoa Bay or Jock Road in later years had its beginnings in this age old trade foot path.

After the completion of the Eastern railway line between Pretoria and Delagoa Bay, and the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, a start was made to enlist Black workers in Mozambique to work in the gold mines on the Reef. Unscrupulous traders opened stores along the homeward-bound routes of the Blacks after their contracts had expired. The traders sold cheap liquor (of poor quality) and inferior trade goods to the Blacks and robbed them of their hard-earned money. A few of these stores were situated in the area which was later proclaimed the Sabi Reserve, and continued to operate until the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War. The stores necessarily had to be near perennial water, and there are in particular, two sites where today there is no sign of natural surface water. The first of the trading stores was established at Gomondwane in the decade preceding the Anglo-Boer War. The owners were two characters of uncertain virtue, Sardelli the Greek, and a certain Charlie Woodlands. A number of bluegum trees that they had planted, still stand there today.

Sardelli and Woodlands also built another wood-and-iron store just west of the Nhlowa Spruit, south of Lower Sabie, about one kilometre south-west of the Mthandifene Waterhole in the Nhlowa Spruit. That was where Steinacker’s Horse interned the old hunter, Bill Sanderson for a while when he refused to fight against his friends the Boers.

The other trading stores in those days were the ones at Nkongoma, Alf Robert’s well-known “Tengamanzi” store at Nellmapiusdrift and Julius Furley’s store on the eastern side of Komati Drift. All these stores were located near permanent water sources. Surface water is at present non-existent at most of these situations as well as Albasini’s old trading posts at Manungukop and Josikhulu Spruit.

2.10 War in the Lowveld and climatic conditions during the war years

After the Boer forces had been defeated in the battle of Dalmanutha, they retreated along the Eastern railway line to the Lowveld. At Hectorspruit,
General Ben Viljoen, the commander of the Boer forces, destroyed his heavy artillery. He then sent the burghers who were without horses, the remaining Long Tom cannon and two other cannon, to Komatipoort. Here the last of the heavy artillery were destroyed (presumably on the banks of the Crocodile River opposite the Komatipoort station) and the burghers either crossed the border into Portuguese East Africa, where they were interned by the Portuguese, or they surrendered to the advancing forces of General Pole-Carew.

On 18th September 1900, General Ben Viljoen and his mounted troops crossed the Crocodile River at Hectorspruit and passed through the Lowveld in the direction of Blyde River and Leydsdorp.

In his reminiscences of the war, General Viljoen (1902) wrote: “Het Boschveld, waardoor wij trokken, had een smoren klimaat, dat nog verergerd word door dé droogte. De hitte was voordag zoo ondragelijk dat wij alleen des nachts konden trekken. Water was zeer schaerch en de meeste bronnen, die volgens oude jachters onder ons, ons konden verwikken, vonden wij opgedroogd. Het veld was zoo schoon uitgebrand dat er in het geheel geen gras was te vinden en het heelwat moeite kostte de dieren in het leven te houden. Hier en daar troffen wij kafferstammen aan, aan wie wij gelukkig voor een handvol zout of suiker een emmer melies konden krijgen.

Er was in deze streken veel wild. Men zag er wildebeesten, hartebeesten, rooibokken enz. soms in groepen van vijf tot twintig tegelijk en des nachts het gebrul van die leeuwen en het gehuil van wolven. Zelfs overdags had men wel eens een ontmoeting met een leeuw. Nu is het een van de zwakheden van den Afrikaner, en wel zijn sterkste zwakheid, dat hij nie kan nalaten te schieten als hy wild ziet, en het scheelt hem niet of het verboden is of toegestaan. Van elk commandantschap waren eenige burgers uit om wild te schieten voor de voeding der kommando's; doch vele andere gingen stilletjes, zoodat in de dichte boshagen honderden rondjogen. Het gevolg was dat het scheen alsof er een werkelijke gevecht aan de gang was, wanneer een klompje burgers enig wild ontdekte.

Den zevenden dag (25 September 1900) bereikten wij de Blijderivier, waar men een der fraaiste gesichten heeft van de geheele Bosveld. De Blijderivier, die haar oorsprong heeft naby Pelgrimsrust, en naby de Lebomboberge (sic) in de Groote Olifantsrivier vloeit, heeft op de plaats waar wij de rivier kruisten, een stroom van ongeveer veertig voet breed en kristalhelder. De gelijke bodem is bezaaid met witte steentjes en langs beide oevers groeien, prachtige, hooge boommen.”

If the theory advanced by Tyson & Dyer (1978) that the Lowveld had experienced a double dry cycle at the beginning of the twentieth century from about 1897 to 1917 is correct, then General Viljoen’s description corresponds with such a dry period. It is, however, significant that there had still been ample water in the area in spite of the drought, even in running streams such as the Blyde River. The latter would today have been a dry stream had it not been fed from the Blydepoort Dam.

Illuminating too is the fact that Steinaecker’s Horse, a unit raised by Major L.F. von Steinaecker to protect the border between the Transvaal and Moçambique, established an outpost at Gomandwane from November 1900.
until the end of the war in 1902. The outpost was manned by ten Whites and 40 or more Blacks, and depended for water on the waterholes in the Vurhami Spruit near Sardelli’s old trading store. Today there is no longer any surface water at this site and even the large waterholes further downstream, the Nsosweni, Mpemana and Zabala, dry up during times of prolonged drought, such as experienced in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s.

2.11 The proclamation of the Sabi and Shingwedzi reserves, and early development

On the 26th March 1898, after a debate which went on for many years, the old Sabi Game Reserve was proclaimed in the Volksraad by President Kruger. It covered mainly the area between the Sabie and Crocodile rivers, the Nsikazi River in the west and the Lebombo Mountains in the east. There was no real, orderly management and the administration of the area was entrusted to two Z.A.R. policemen, I.C. Holtzhausen, who was stationed at Komatipoort, and Paul Bester of Nelspruit, respectively.

Until the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 their duties consisted mainly of anti-poaching patrols. After the Peace of Vereeniging the British administration re proclaimed the old Sabi Reserve (using the original Dutch text) and on the 1st July 1902 appointed Major James Stevenson-Hamilton, an officer in the Inniskilling Dragoons, as the first Warden of this conservation area. The original Sabi Reserve was soon extended when a large piece of ground to the west of the Nsikazi River was added to the area. Major Stevenson-Hamilton was also given rights of control over a large part of the privately- and State-owned ground between the Sabie and Olifants rivers, and the Klaserie and northern Sand River in the west. In 1903 the Shingwedzi Reserve was proclaimed, which covered a large area between the Luvuvhu and Letaba rivers. Stevenson-Hamilton was an energetic person who committed himself with enthusiasm to his task of conserving game in the Lowveld.

As soon as he could, he appointed a staff consisting of White and Black game rangers, and his first cadre of White game rangers included legendary figures such as Harry Wolhuter, Thomas Duke, Gaza Gray, Cecil de Laporte, “Tim” Healy and Major A.A. Frazer. From 1904 Frazer was put in command of the Shingwedzi Reserve. Stevenson-Hamilton created order among the wide-spread Black settlements in the area. Many of them were resettled outside the Reserve and he succeeded in putting a halt to the large-scale game poaching that had resumed after the war.

Judging by Major Stevenson-Hamilton’s first reports on the Sabi and Shingwedzi reserves, the physiognomy of the plant communities, the water distribution pattern and the composition of the fauna of both the Sabi and Shingwedzi reserves, differed greatly from the present situation.

Game had inevitably become thinned out because of persistent hunting by White and Black hunters. Certain animals species such as buffalo, eland, kudu, warthog Phacochoerus aethiopicus, and even blue wildebeest had been almost wiped out by the great rinderpest epidemic of 1896. The predator species were, however, plentiful and well distributed. Stevenson-Hamilton soon introduced a programme to control the number of predators to enable
the dwindling prey species to increase in number. He achieved great success with the scheme, and in general the game populations increased in consequence of the control measures. It is obvious that certain antelope species in those days had been more plentiful in relation to other species than is the case at present. Grazers (except buffalo) were generally more numerous than browsers (except impala *Aepyceros melampus*).

Because of the rinderpest epidemic there were no eland and very few kudu left in the Sabi Reserve. Only a small herd of buffalo survived in the Nwatimhiri Bush, together with a few black rhino *Diceros bicornis*. Elephant were completely wiped out by hunters, and the rivers accommodated only a few hippopotami. On the other hand redbuck, waterbuck (which is not a popular prey species of hunters) and even sable antelope and tsessebe *Damaliscus lunatus* were relatively more numerous, and wildebeest and even zebra less numerous than today. In addition to the effect of selective hunting and the rinderpest which affected only certain animal species, the reason for the difference in animal proportions can be found when comparing the landscape features and plant community physiognomy prevailing at that time with those of today as well as the availability and distribution of natural water.

On all the old photographs taken of familiar fixed points in former days (1902–1920), it is evident that the area was considerably less overgrown by woody vegetation than today. The area from Pretoriuskop and Ship Mountain westward to Mtimba was open grass plains with only a few trees and shrubs in the vegetation composition, and the trees, especially, were restricted to the rocky hills and drainage zones (streams and riverbanks).

In the light of these facts it is no wonder that redbuck and even oribi *Ourebia ourebi* occurred in such large numbers in the area. Waterbuck, too, was abundant in suitable water-rich habitats, and sable and roan antelope *Hippotragus equinus*, and tsessebe were to be found in small herds. On the other hand, giraffe, kudu, and even impala, were either totally absent, or very rare. The reason for the open grassland aspect of the Pretoriuskop region in the early years of the KNP’s existence may possibly be found in a long succession of hot fires which raged annually in the dry season, and burnt back the ligneous species. The fact that these regular annual fires could have had such a suppressive effect on woody vegetation, points to a better rainfall regime extending back to the years before the park came into existence. This is borne out by the hunting stories and descriptions left by well-known hunters such as H. Glynn, V. Kirby and E. Sandeman.

The widespread distribution and abundance of waterbuck (they were even selected as the species to be shot for food rations), similarly point to a much wider and more permanent distribution of natural water than is the case today. This despite the fact that the years from 1897 to 1916 (according to the rainfall analysis of Tyson & Dyer (1978)) represented a relatively dry cycle of twice the usual duration.

Another indication of the generally more open appearance and predominance of grasslands in the vegetation of the Lowveld during the early years of the KNP, may be found in an analysis of the accounts of predators destroyed during this period. It is significant that during the years preceding the First World War proportionally more serval *Felis serval* (inhabitants of

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the more open, grassy regions) were destroyed than caracal Felis caracal or Cape wildcat Felis lybica (which prefer more woody types of habitat). Today serval is the rarest small cat species in the Kruger National Park.

One can also reasonably assume that the gradual afforestation or bush encroachment of the area over a long period must have been detrimental to cheetah numbers in the Kruger National Park. The progressive increase in woody vegetation can be ascribed to a number of factors in which the following could all have played a part:

(i) Stevenson-Hamilton forbade the cutting of trees and shrubs by Black squatters. (ii) Through the years extensive and very hot veld fires have been systematically controlled and with progressively greater success. (iii) Better grazing of the veld by increasing numbers of game, which resulted in “cooler” and less frequent veld fires. (iv) Overgrazing during times of prolonged drought benefited woody plants (i.e. woody intrusion).

If the apparent long-term oscillation in rainfall in Hall’s (1976) histogram of the annual growth rings in his yellowwood tree can be confirmed, the lower precipitation during the period 1902-1970 (which is clearly indicated by Gertenbach’s (1980) data) must necessarily also have been beneficial to the drought-resistant, woody vegetation.

Extensive stands of beautiful mlala palm trees (Hyphaene natalensis Kunze) appear on many of Major Stevenson-Hamilton’s old photographs of the northern Lebombo Flats and probably attained maximum height during a previous long, wet cycle (cf. the 1760-1860 period on Hall’s histogram).

During that period there had been relatively few elephant in the Lowveld because of excessive hunting. The Black population was nomadic and sparsely distributed as a consequence of the massacres and plundering incursions of Zulu and Swazi impis from the south and east.

The disappearance of these large stands of single-stemmed palms can be attributed mainly to the activities of Black mlala beer brewers subsequent to 1902. Stevenson-Hamilton wrote in 1912 after a visit to the north: “Natives in the protected area between the Letaba and Olifants rivers originally came from the Shingwedzi reserve and were resettled here because of the poaching.” (This portion only became part of the conservation area in 1926 when the KNP was finally proclaimed). “They are carrying on with their poaching in this area. In addition to game killing a very large amount of cutting good timber is done by these people. Quite recently I have been informed that very large numbers of particularly fine palm trees along one of the larger spruits...” (probably the Nwanedzi) “...have been cut down by natives of the neighbouring kraal merely to get at the brouns for palm wine.” In later years droughts, veld fires, and elephant depredation certainly also played a role in wiping out the single-stemmed mlala palms in those regions.

The large numbers of dead leadwood (Combretum imberbe) stumps which can still be seen in abundance on the eastern Lebombo plains probably also date back to a more favourable climatic regime. Dendrochronological studies, comparing a number of dead stumps with living trees, will probably give an indication of the time when these trees died, and the duration and intensity of the drought which killed them.