

Book reviews

Okavango Jewel of the Kalahari

Karen Ross

BBC Books, 1987, 256 pp., HB £12.95

Like most wilderness areas nowadays, the Okavango has become easily accessible to anyone who can afford a safari to Botswana. After diamonds and cattle, tourism is now Botswana's main income earner and the biggest employer in the north of the country.

Visitors can stay in comfortable small lodges and fishing camps, and travel by *mokoro*—the traditional dugout canoe of the BaYei swamp-dwellers—deep into the delta's green and shady heart, poling down hippo channels in the papyrus, drifting across water-lily lagoons where fish eagles cry and red lechwe bound away among innumerable islands of lush grass and palm groves.

Produced as a companion to Michael Rosenberg's magnificent trilogy of natural history films on the Okavango, shown on BBC TV in 1987, Karen Ross's book is also an indispensable guide for anyone contemplating a visit to Africa's most beautiful oasis. It is easy to read and covers not only the delta with its extraordinary swamp-loving denizens (sitatunga, Pel's fishing owl), but also explores the Kalahari itself, where the land runs on for ever; a hot, flat emptiness of blond grass and thornveldt crying for rain that seldom comes, yet remains miraculously rich in wild creatures such as gemsbok, meerkat and brown hyena. Even the Makgadikgadi, the ghost of a vast prehistoric lake now turned to salt and dust, can offer the spectacle of cheetahs hunting springhares around its barren margins.

In the final chapters, Karen Ross reveals how all these disparate and fragile habitats are forged together to provide a lifeline for Botswana's migratory herds in times of drought. Break the link by erecting cattle fences and the Kalahari wildebeest cannot survive. Drain the delta for grandiose water abstraction schemes and the entire precarious paradise could be lost.

Accompanying the text are more than 150 superb colour photographs, which would have looked even better with a more generous format; but then no pictures, however large, can fully capture the magic of the Okavango.

Book reviews

Brian Jackman, *Features Writer for the Sunday Times Magazine*

Serengeti

Mitsuaki Iwago

Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1987, 304 pp., PB £14.95

This is far and away the best book of wildlife photographs that I have ever seen from East Africa. I realize this is a far-reaching statement. It is intended to be so.

When I first leafed through its pages, I caught my breath. The photographs not only present one exceptional action sequence after another but also portray a termite nest, an open-plains rainbow, a baobab tree, a lion pride in repose, a sunset, and many another 'serenity' scene, and all with a distinctive panache that I have not encountered before. While some of Iwago's photographs contain multiple species, or thousands of individual animals, there are many others that feature no animals at all, and that evoke a sense of the Serengeti ecosystem. In so far as an ecosystem is an abstraction rather than a concrete entity, that takes some doing.

I once spent half a dozen years as a full-time professional photographer in East Africa. On looking back, I think I have never been so content as when I was clad in bush-shirt and safari-shorts, with a camera in my hands. Whereas most books of African wildlife photographs merely make me miss the place more, Iwago's helps me to recapture something of those glorious years.

For all that the book is paperback, it measures 26 × 21 cm so the plates are reasonably large, all 300 of them. No matter that there are only four pages of introductory text, the photos say everything that needs to be said. I think it will be this book that, when shown to my grandchildren, will cause them to ask: 'If Serengeti was like this, how could you ever allow it to be lost?'

Go and buy a copy of the book for your own delight, buy one for your friend's illumination, buy another for your school's enlightenment. At the absurdly cheap price, you can afford the splendid investment.

Norman Myers, Consultant in Environment and Development, Oxford, UK.