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HISTORICAL NOTES RELATING TO THE LAKE ST LUCIA AREA

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The Eastern Shores of St. Lucia were initially inhabited by a primitive stone-age man (1) whose activities had little effect on the environment. Then, sometime prior to 360 AD (2) Bantu tribes migrated southward along the Mocambique coastal plains to the Eastern Shores, and from this stage onwards man has had a profound influence on the ecology of the whole area. These blacks, with their use of fire to clear agricultural plots and to improve grazing for their stock, and by their felling of hardwood trees to make charcoal for iron smelting have appreciably reduced the extent of the forests which were replaced by the formation of a secondary grassland (i.e. those grasslands where tree growth is not limited by the water-table, but by regular burning). These grasslands would have been suitable for many grazing herbivores which otherwise could not have occurred in the area. However it is doubtful if there was ever much wildlife in the area as the indigenous people would have hunted to a large extent and their cattle would have competed for grazing.

In the late 14th and in the 15th centuries the Portuguese navigators exploring the African coastline discovered the Estuary mouth. Joao de Lisboa compiled a detailed description of the coastline in 1514 and refers to what we know as the Tugela as the St. Lucia river, and the Estuary mouth as the Medaos de Ouro. This gives rise to the popular misconception that the Portuguese sailed their ships into what we now know as the St. Lucia mouth. However as far as Prof Axelson (4) is aware, from reading 16th and 17th century documents there is no record of any Portuguese ship having ever entered what we call St. Lucia. It was only later then after Perestrelo had written his description of the coast in 1576 that the name came to be applied to our St. Lucia.

In 1822 for strategic reasons the Royal Navy sent the ships Leven, Barracouta and later also the Cockburn to carry out surveys of the coastline (5) the captain of the Barracouta was Lieutenant A. Vidal after whom Cape Vidal was named and Leven Point is named after the sloop HMS Leven.

Subsequent to the 1820's explorers and hunters came to Zululand, and it is from the records men such as Fynn, Forewell, Isaacs, Angas, Delegorgue, Dunn, Cowie, Baldwin and Ludlow we know that there was much hunting and trading in the area. During the latter half of the 19th century many hippos were shot at Lake St. Lucia.

St. Lucia Estuary was annexed by Great Britain on December 18th 1884, when HMS Goshawk was sent up from Cape Town. The British flag was raised on Sugar Loaf Hill, thus preventing it from being annexed by Germany to be used as a port by the New Republic (Vryheid). (6) It was the following year that the St. Lucia township, consisting of 304 one acre plots, was proclaimed. The combined St Lucia - Umfolozi mouth area was inspected by Cathcart Methven to evaluate its suitability as a harbour site (7) and acting on his recommendations C.J. Croft in 1905 made a detailed survey of the area. (8) St. Lucia township became popular as a fishing resort, and the first hotel was established by Mackenzie in the late 1920's. It was however not until the mid 1950's that a bridge was built connecting the town to the mainland. Prior to this all traffic had to be transported across the estuary by a pont.

On the 31st of January 1898 the ship Dorothea was wrecked on the reef off Cape Vidal. The ship, it is alleged, was carrying a cargo of illicit gold bought on the Witwatersrand and smuggled out of the country via Lourenco Marques (now Maputo). (9) Numerous salvage attempts have been made to recover the gold, but none have been successful.

In 1898, the Reverend L.O. Feyling, a Norwegian missionary, established the mission station at Mt. Tabor on the Eastern Shores. This continued to function until the mid 1950's when the Forestry Department moved most of the indigenous population out of the area. Other mission stations which have operated for shorter periods were at Cape Vidal, Ozaben near Ochre Hill and the Nkonyana Mission School just north of Bangazi - north.

In 1912 G. Challis & D. Brodie were granted an area of 100 acres (approx. 42ha) at Makakatana to start a trading business. In 1923 this land was declared a private township and several houses have been built there. (11)

In 1911 the Umfolozi settlement was established, and sugar cane was planted on the Umfolozi flats. This led to the establishment of the Umfolozi mill in 1916, and in 1923 the Umfolozi sugar co-op was formed. (12) To increase the area of the Umfolozi flats which could be planted, much of the area has been canalised, and the extensive papyrus and Phragmites swamps were drained. In 1936 Warner's drain was constructed which canalised the Umfolozi river. (13) In spite of all the dredging and draining of the area major floods occurred in 1918, 1925, 1957, 1963 and 1977, all of which resulted in large areas of cane being flooded.

A direct result of the canalization, which negated the filtering effect of the Umfolozi swamp, was to allow sediments from the poorly managed catchment areas to be deposited in the combined St. Lucia-Umfolozi mouth, causing it to silt up completely in 1951. To alleviate this problem of silt deposition, a new mouth for the Umfolozi was constructed in 1953 by the newly formed St. Lucia Reclamation Unit. The accumulated silt in the St. Lucia estuary was dredged and its mouth re-opened in 1955 after having been blocked for four years. (14) During these years when the mouth was closed there was no fishing, and the town whose livelihood depended on fishermen became a ghost town.

In 1942, the day before Italy officially became involved in World War II, the ship Timavo from Trieste left Durban, and headed northwards, but was intercepted just north of Leven Point and told to return to Durban. The captain of the ship, rather than have his ship used against Italy in the war effort, beached the ship. This wreck is still a landmark of the Zululand coastline.

It was also in 1942 that U-boats were responsible for the loss of many tons of shipping off the South African coastline. Because of this, part of the RAF 262 squadron was based at St. Lucia in 1943 to carry out anti-submarine patrols along the coastline with their catalina flying-boats. To bring supplies to the aircraft, which used to land on the lake, a road was constructed from the Nyalazi rail siding to Charters Creek, and from there the supplies taken across the lake by boat.

The aircraft used to operate from a jetty, now known as "old jetty", constructed just north of Ukwakwa. The staff were housed in prefabricated buildings about one kilometer inland. The observation building (with radar?) was erected at Mt. Tabor and has recently been converted into an overnight hut for the Mziki trail.

On the 25 June 1943 one of the Catalinas crashed on take-off killing eight of the nine crew. The wreck can still be seen just south of Brodies Crossing.

By October 1944 the level of Lake St. Lucia had dropped to such an extent that the aircraft had difficulty in operating, and they had to be moved to Lake Msingazi north of Richards Bay. (15)

In 1947 the Natal Parks Board was established replacing the Zululand Reserves Committee as the body responsible for the enforcement of the wildlife ordinance. It was a couple of years after this that a conservation officer was first stationed permanently at St. Lucia.

In the early 50's the Government Forestry Department started silvicultural operations on the Western shores and a few years later on the Eastern Shores. On the Eastern Shores their first move was first to move most of the indigenous population out of the area, build houses at Cape Vidal (Meersig plantation) at Mt. Tabor (Estuary plantation) and to plant approx. 3000ha of the grasslands under Pinus elliottii.

In 1968 the South African Defence Force established a missile testing range in the northern part of the reserve, with a base on the tip of Ndlozi peninsula.

Thus we see from this brief history that ever since the arrival of the Bantu tribes, man has had a dominating effect on the environment, and unfortunately as time progresses and man becomes more technologically advanced, so the magnitude of his influence on the environment increases.

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