

Abstract

Lesotho has been subjected to tremendous biodiversity changes over the last two centuries, primarily due to an ever increasing pressure on land settlement and the extraction of Natural resources. Lesotho is therefore in the process of preserving biodiversity through the establishment of nature reserves. If there are plans to introduce new or reintroduce past species, past biogeographical patterns of fauna need to be established. The aim of this study is to use documentary evidence, oral history approaches and archaeological reports to establish relative species occurrence and timing of species extinctions; and to also establish the general causes of species disappearance.

Documentary sources studied were written in English, French and Sesotho between 1833 and 1978. The period after 1978 was studied through the use of oral interviews within several villages in Lesotho. Archaeological information reviewed supplied information about fauna in the region of Lesotho and eastern Free State during the Holocene. The use of these three methods provides a timeline for the existence of faunal species from the Holocene to the present in the region.

The beginning of the 19th Century saw the extinction of several large mammals in Lesotho and the eastern Free State. The blue antelope had already become globally extinct during this time. According to documented evidence quagga occurred in the region of Lesotho and the eastern Free State until the 1870s, after which it became globally extinct. Lions and hippopotami occurred until the 1870s and 1890s respectively. Most large antelope such as the wildebeest (blue and black), red hartebeest and springbok also occurred within the region during the mid and late 19th Century after which they disappeared. Eland are still an occasional visitor to the Sehlabathebe National Park. Smaller antelope such as oribi and klipspringer still occur in some parts of Lesotho though in very small numbers. Grey rhebok are, however, still common in the highlands. Baboons, even though significantly decreased in numbers, still occur in packs in several places within Lesotho.

Approximately 40 species of mammals, several species of birds and reptiles have been identified as presently existing in Lesotho and the surrounding eastern Free State. There have been reports of mammals which are unlikely to occur in Lesotho, both historical and present, and these have been identified.

The causes of species decline have been attributed to increased population growth, which leads to over-hunting and more importantly to a decrease in the habitat available for wildlife. Most causes are anthropogenic, caused by increased competition of resources between man and wildlife. Other causes have been in the form of extreme climatic events such as snow and drought.