

The drought of the 1890s in south-eastern Africa

Kathleen Pribyl (1,2), David Nash (2), Jorgen Klein (3), and Georgina Endfield (4)

(1) Climatic Research Unit, School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK (k.pribyl@uea.ac.uk),
(2) School of Environment and Technology, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK, (3) Department of Social Sciences,
Hedmark University College, Hamar, Norway, (4) School of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

During the second half of the 1890s south-eastern Africa, from modern day Zimbabwe and Botswana down to South Africa, was hit by a drought driven ecological crisis. Using instrumental observations and previously unexploited documentary records in the form of British administrative sources, reports and letters by various Protestant mission societies and newspapers, the extent, duration and severity of the drought are explored. Generally the period was marked by a delayed onset of the rainy season of several months; rainfall totals dropped and perennial rivers such as the Limpopo dried up. The delay of the rainy season negatively impacted the rain-fed agriculture. Recurrent drought conditions during the rainy season frequently withered the young crops. In the interior of southern Africa, on the border of the Kalahari desert, the drought was more severe and continuous than towards the coast of the Indian Ocean. The prolonged dry conditions furthered the outbreak of locust plagues and cattle disease, which in the 1890s took the disastrous form of Rinderpest. A model is established showing how the drought as the original driver of the crisis, triggered a cascade of responses from harvest failure to famine and finally leading to profound socio-economic change.