

The burrowed earth: rodents in Zimbabwe's environmental history

Gerald Chikozho Mazarire

Abstract

Increased contact between human and rodent habitats has been registered in recent years following growing urbanization, forest loss and the expansion of grassland in the African savannah. The evolution of rodent ecologies and the implications of the growing rodent numbers for human health and food security are a growing reality. However, rodents tend to dominate public discourse and policy debates in sub-Saharan Africa only during times of outbreaks and rarely do the interventions that are made tap into local knowledge. This paper documents the historiography of rodent research in Zimbabwe over a period of close to a century, covering rodent classifications and the place of rodents in human diet, nutrition and health. It uses evidence drawn from two different rodent colonies in rural southern Zimbabwe and explores biomyths and knowledge drawn from communities with a long history of co-existence with rodents, sometimes hunting, trapping and consuming them. Putting this in the context of a rodent outbreak that took place in 1992/1993 it demonstrates the usefulness of a historical appreciation of human–rodent relations in policy matters in a world confronted by the detrimental effects of climate change.