

Book reviews

Episodes and Tribulations of the African Ranger: A Tale of Tales by a Veteran

Conservationist by Joseph Serugo (2020) 165 pp., TFK-Luminary Publishers, Kampala, Uganda. ISBN 978-9970-578-05-4 (pbk), UGX 35,000 (GBP 8.00).

At the first African Parks Congress (Kigali, Rwanda, July 2022), I found this unobtrusive autobiography of former Ugandan park warden Joseph Serugo. Few seem to have paid attention to it, unfortunately, yet his autobiography is a landmark in African conservation, providing a different perspective from those of wardens, invariably of European descent, who described the spectacular African wildlife and protected areas at the end of the colonial and early independence period. George Adamson's *Bwana Game* and Bruce Kinloch's *Shamba Raiders*, amongst others, featured in this journal's book reviews in the 1960–1970s. Following independence and the subsequent Africanization of wildlife services, (Western) public fascination seems to have shifted to Western scientists and conservation NGOs working in African protected areas, such as Jane Goodall, Cynthia Moss and Ian Douglas-Hamilton. This Western conservation centrism was bitterly attacked in the *The Big Conservation Lie*, arguing that the narrative of wildlife conservation in Africa is unjustifiably dominated by the so-called white saviour perspective, undermining the critical role that rangers, communities and local organizations play in conserving natural resources (Mbaria & Ogada, 2016). It is refreshing that Serugo took the initiative to revisit the prime subject of this controversy, the ranger autobiography, providing an insider's view into the lives of African park managers.

Joseph Serugo studied Botany and Zoology at Makerere University, Uganda, in the early 1980s, when his interest in conservation was triggered by a visit to Queen Elizabeth National Park. After teaching in neighbouring Kenya, he returned to Uganda in 1989 at the end of the civil war. He applied for a position as ranger at the Game Department, was rejected, but nevertheless started as a project assistant in Queen Elizabeth National Park. Serugo soon left to pursue post-graduate training at the African College of Wildlife Management at Mweka, Tanzania. Mweka, created at independence to deliver qualified African wildlife managers, offers practical training to students from all over the continent (Scholte, 2003). It was there that Serugo learnt about the realities of African wildlife management. Returning to Uganda in 1991, Serugo was posted at Bwindi National Park, the start of a career at the Uganda Wildlife

Authority that lasted till 2007, during which he managed six protected areas: Bwindi, Kibale, Lake Mburo, Rwenzori Mountains, Kibale-Semuliki and Mount Elgon National Parks, and which ended with a short period at headquarters. The book's chapters are centred around these postings, with a presentation of Uganda's outstanding protected areas in the annexes.

Bwindi National Park is now a prime tourism destination, renowned for its mountain gorillas, but in 1991 tourism and the Park's infrastructure were still in their infancy. As in Serugo's subsequent postings, the presence of research and development programmes was often a blessing as they provided much-needed logistical support, and stimulating professional exchanges, also with colleagues abroad. Such projects could also be a curse, however, and Serugo describes in his straightforward style a number of sour personal relationships, sometimes resulting in transfers to other postings. Whereas previous generations of European wardens had a military or hunting background, Serugo was amongst the first with university training. European wardens in Africa used to have high social status, albeit with low income and limited operational support (Parker & Bleazard, 2001). This high status was not enjoyed by subsequent African managers such as Serugo, but the personal costs of being a ranger remained high, as readers of this book will discover. Serugo himself encountered multiple tragedies, including the loss of his wife on the eve of his departure to Mweka, car and motorbike accidents, suicides of colleagues, highway robberies, village uprisings and attacks by wildlife. One wonders how he and his colleagues remained motivated despite poor working conditions, low salaries, lack of career progression, corruption, and most strikingly, the brusque and sometimes irrational changes in postings.

I encourage all involved in wildlife conservation to read Serugo's autobiography, enjoy his adventures, and be inspired by his pragmatism and positive attitude. I hope that increased awareness of the harsh working conditions of rangers may stimulate much-needed improvements, which will be essential for attracting qualified rangers such as Serugo, on whom—now more than ever before—the future of African wildlife depends.

References

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Among Tigers: Fighting to Bring Back Asia's Big Cats by K. Ullas Karanth (2022) 256 pp., Chicago Review Press, Chicago, USA. ISBN 978-1-64160-654-7 (hbk), USD 30.00.

Tigers in zoos. Tigers in circuses. Tigers in private homes. Tigers in tiger farms. Tigers for amusement. Tigers for worship. Tigers for status. Tigers for bones. There are more tigers in captivity serving human needs than in the wild—WWF estimates twice as many.

But what about tigers for their own sakes, those magnificent felids stalking through the sal forests of India after a gaur? These are the tigers that Ullas Karanth has spent his life working to save and this is the story of the author's life with, and for, tigers. Starting with a passion for nature but no formal training, Karanth taught himself much about nature through exploring his native Karnataka state in south-western India, always convinced that his life's work was to save tigers.

After several career changes, Karanth received a PhD from the University of Florida. During his studies, he conducted path-breaking work on radio-collared individual tigers and leopards in Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka. There, he endured intense days in the field tracking the cats, and painstakingly assembled his findings into an understanding of how tigers and leopards lived within the landscape, what they ate, how fights rearranged their social structures, and what happened when cubs dispersed and set up new territories. His detailed work revealed a fact that is critical for tiger conservation: female tigers can breed successfully and rapidly if given sufficient food—wild cattle, deer and boar in large numbers—and left to live in settings with few people or domestic animals.

Karanth's observations not only provided vital information on tigers, but his long-term field presence also allowed him to build on the strong Indian tradition of lay people's interest in natural history. He recruited and trained a cadre of citizen scientists to conduct line