

## Garamba – Conservation in Peace and War

Edited by Kes Hillman Smith, José Kalpers with Luis Arranz and photography by Nuria Ortega

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*Garamba – Conservation in Peace and War* offers a comprehensive history of Garamba National Park (NP) from the 1920s to date. Located in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo and covering 4,900 km<sup>2</sup>, the northern boundary of the park is also the international frontier with recently independent Southern Sudan and the watershed between the Congo and Nile Rivers. Politically and geographically it is “isolated from everything and everyone”.

Part factual documentation, part reference, it is the personal reflections of the myriad authors’ and their valiant conservation efforts in both peace—and conflict—that will make *Garamba – Conservation in Peace and War* an engrossing read for conservationists, natural history enthusiasts, intrepid adventurers and many more vicarious travellers.

These detailed accounts, edited by Kes Hillman Smith, José Kalpers, and Luis Arranz are illustrated with beautiful photography much of which is by Nuria Ortega.

The book begins with the historical background of Garamba NP gazetted in March 1938 during Belgian Colonial administration, then managed by the Institut Zairois pour la Conservation de la Nature (IZCN) later ICCN, a para-statal “ahead of its time” and composed of members of the scientific community. This provides perspective to the ensuing decades of development; power struggles post independence and challenges faced by the Institute during the civil wars that held the country in a suffocating vice-like grip—a testament to the dedication of the staff who worked there.

This is followed by chapters covering conservation management, species descriptions, community conservation, current conservation under the private-public partnership of the African Parks, vegetation and climate trends, and annexes which include a complete bird, mammal, amphibian and reptile checklist. The book explores in depth the onslaught of conflict and poaching. At times not only did the poaching “spiral out of control” as Madame Bashige, (who worked there in the 1990s) recounts; Garamba and the surrounding ecosystem became a battlefield with a multiplicity of forces involved in conflict based in close proximity to the park.

It is often an astonishing read—not least the heritage of the Elephant Domestication Centre developed in the early 1900s, with elephants being used for bush clearing, patrolling and occasionally tourism. The seven last domesticated elephants were on parade for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Garamba in 1989. However, the venture was not without controversy; four Indian elephants and their mahouts (*carnacs*) were initially transported from India and embarked on a 1000 km safari

from Dar es Salaam to the interior. The expedition ended in tragedy as one by one all the elephants succumbed to various ailments, the last dying of loneliness, and many other elephants died before the programme became a success.

From the footprint left by Victor Van Straelen to create a precious environment along the model of Yellowstone, to the first ‘temporary’ warden Major Pierre Offerman who was there for eight years until 1946, Garamba’s history is replete with larger than life personalities. Many of the early wardens carried out operations on foot and horseback. In the 1950s and 1960s, key roles were played by a chief from the Azande tribe Willibrod Vukoyo who worked alongside the Belgian “conservateurs” as a guard, Muhindo Mesi chief park warden in the 1980s, and the ranger Aliyu Droma who assisted in developing a road network and maintaining it throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Authors include Jacques Verschuren who as a young zoologist first came to Garamba NP in 1948, and who, in the late 1960s was appointed Director-General of Zaire’s NPs by President Mobutu himself, Count Claude Cornet d’Elzius, who directed the Elephant Domestication Centre based at Gangala-na-Bodio in the 1950s, Samy Mankoto ma Mbaelele appointed Director General of the IZCN in 1985 and Luis Arranz, managing warden for African Parks from 2008-2014. And of course Fraser Smith who held responsibility for much of the renovation, new infrastructure, logistics, operations, data collection, and most importantly anti-poaching efforts in the first of Garamba’s rehabilitation projects from 1983-2005, staying on until it became just too dangerous to continue.

The voices of heroes are also captured—with tragic recounts of many who lost their lives there during fierce fire fights. While Sylvain Vutamara, meteorologist fled the park on crutches and survived, others were not so fortunate. Ali, the officer in charge of the Elephant Domestication Centre in 1998 was executed by firing squad by Laurent Kabilas’ forces, although Congolese he was of Tutsi origin.

Among the numerous men who steered Garamba’s course, there are several women who have left their mark too. Marie-Huguette wife of park warden Albert Ory a generation earlier, Eulalie Bashige who headed the ICCN during the long civil war that lasted from late 1998 to 2003 in the 1990s and who has also contributed a chapter in the book, and editor Kes Hillman Smith who lived nearly a quarter of a century in Garamba with her husband Fraser Smith.

Formerly head of the AfRSG-Rhino Species Survival Commission Hillman Smith’s, law enforcement monitoring and scientific research covers a period of 22 years. Her data collection of rare species such as the endangered Kordofan Giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis antiquorum*), and Northern White rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*), which gave rise to Garamba’s UNESCO World Heritage status—“the rarest large mammal in the world”, and now tragically probably extinct in the wild is sobering. The Northern White Rhinos were “the subject of intensive conservation and monitoring—with every rhino known individually and their families followed through generations”. (The DRC is unique in having had a major UN Foundation UNESCO backed project aimed specifically at maintaining conservation throughout armed conflict.)

Within the ecosystem 163 mammal species have been recorded, elephants being the largest biomass of wildlife and buffaloes the most numerous. However, every component of the ecosystem has been affected by the changes caused by external factors such as poaching/human influence from mammals to invertebrates.

Surrounded by conflict and lawlessness—within Zaire/ DRC (rebel armies), and from neighbouring countries, Sudan (militia and Muharaleen horsemen) and Uganda (Lords Resistance Army)—the book details the challenging work of conserving this wild, remote park through good times of increase and through war-linked waves of brutal slaughter of African elephants and Northern White Rhinos. In less than seven years (between 1978 and 1984) Garamba's elephants were reduced from 22,670 to 4,500; however, with the Garamba Project in partnership with IZCN, the populations of both elephants and rhinos doubled in eight years and were maintained even through wars. But in the aftermath of the Congo and Sudan wars, the region awash with weapons, and advantaged by the power vacuum created by warring factions and shifting power politics, these militia reduced the elephant population to around 1,500 and the rhinos to near extinction.

In one of the most war-torn regions of Africa the wildlife were by no means the only victims of continuous conflict, cruelty and resource plunder. Massacres of villagers were also common, even missions were targeted, ransacked, and “doctors, nurses, patients—slashed to death”.

*Garamba – Conservation in Peace and War* also describes the mishandling of decision making by the powers that be, layers of bureaucracy and challenge to keep funding flowing if only to pay the rangers who were an indispensable part of anti-poaching strategies and fuel the vehicles and aircraft used in security and reconnaissance. At times what is especially heart breaking is a sense of futility by [everyone] continuing the battle. However, as Arranz recently warden for six years explains: “[Garamba] survived because there have always been people willing to keep fighting for its existence”.

There are other sections that highlight the success of conservation strategy. The concerted efforts by managers and field staff and collaboration among indefatigable funding partners resulted in strengthening conservation activities throughout DRC. Mankoto ma Mbaelele explains that during the good times Garamba presents an example of “vibrant, motivated and courageous efforts from ICCN staff and conservation partners to maintain conservation during [adversity].” As Hillman Smith says: “conservation success was measured in minimising the loss”, and wildlife numbers stabilised and even increased slightly recovering after poaching episodes.

There is also a chapter describing the documentary filmed and directed by renowned wildlife cinematographer Alan Root: *Garamba the Impossible Elephants* in 1992. Too tragic to be a coffee table glossy, on the other hand despite being cogently delineated, at times in place of bland resignation, I would have preferred to feel a healthy dose of anger at such wanton loss.

Garamba still faces an uncertain future, and the reader can only hope that in the hands of African Parks who took over the management and reconstruction of Garamba in November 2008 a public private partnership arrangement with the Government of

DRC, and secured funding streams, that a tragic destiny, which seemed inevitable has been averted. The hope remains that one day wildlife numbers will increase and the merciless slaughter stop.

Perhaps the future lies in community conservation, which the book introduces in the closing chapters. As elsewhere in Africa population numbers are rising and these days 200,000 people live in areas surrounding Garamba. Recognised by the editors is that the long-term protection can only be successful in tandem with community engagement and empowerment recognising the interdependence of conservation and sustainable development. No doubt the surrounding communities appreciate community conservation initiatives and security against lawlessness, however, unless African communities themselves acquire values and environmental ethics beyond economic interests, wildlife (however rare) across the length and breadth of the continent will continue to be lost.

What filters through clearly from the first page until the last is the dedication and passion of the many conservationists and rangers involved at Garamba. “Conservation is rarely easy—but it is worth it”, says Hillman Smith in this impressive piece of conservation history.

To obtain a copy of this book, contact:

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