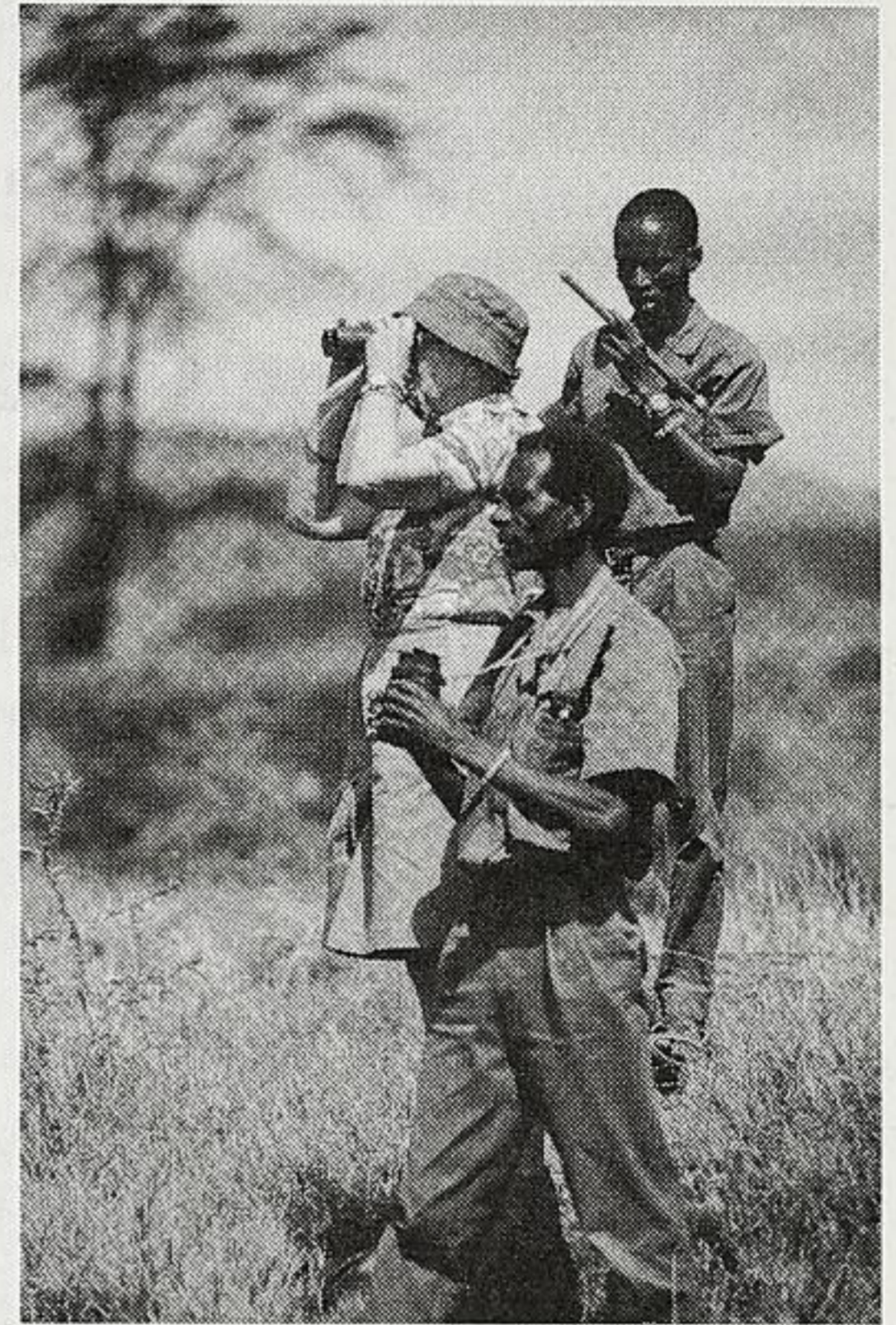
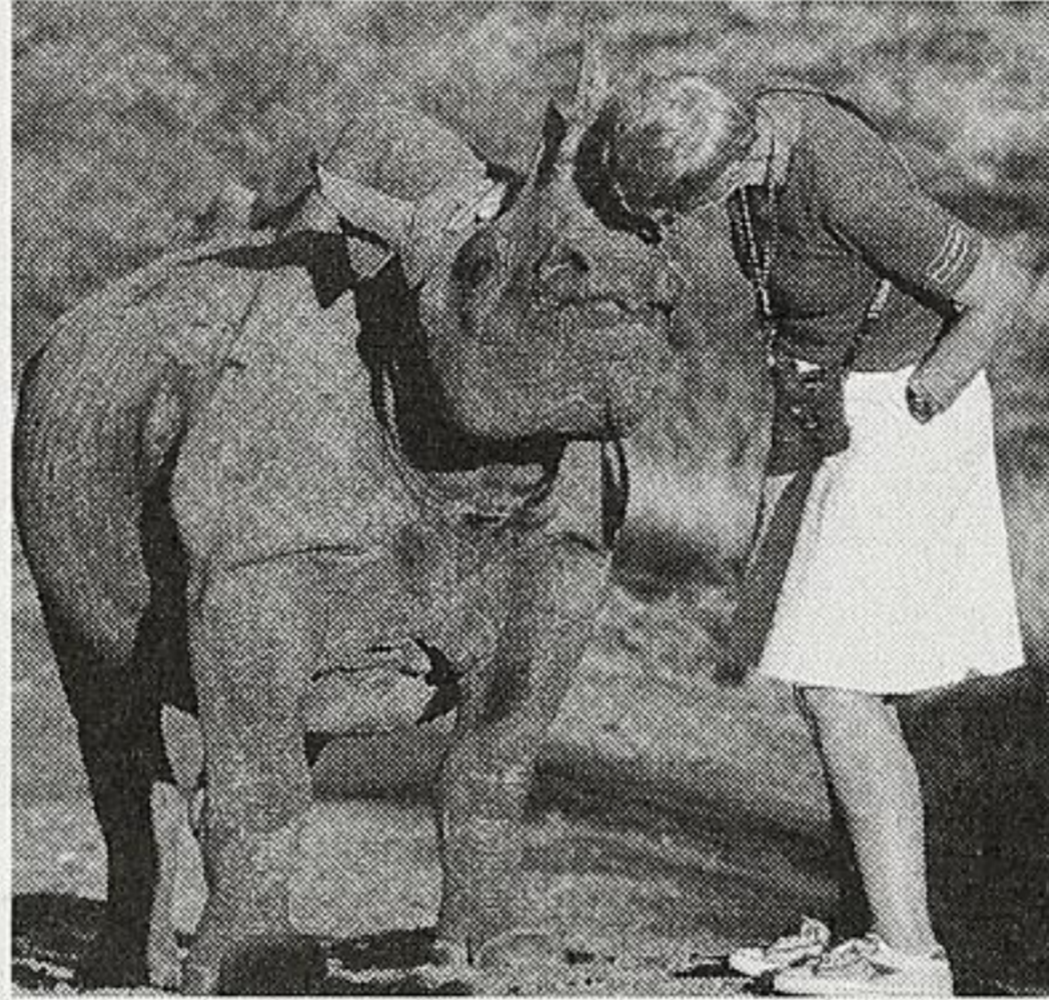


A Letter to the AAZK Membership from Anna Merz



In the late 1950s I moved from the U.K. to Ghana and went to live in Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti. Kumasi was known for having one of the biggest markets in West Africa and I soon found that this bustling and vibrant place was a source not only of total fascination but also great horror. Every local foodstuff was to be found there; colourful heaps of fruit and vegetables I had neither seen nor heard of before, plus every sort of creature both great and small, alive and dead ... From giant forest snails for soup to the highly valued skin of an elephant's ear to make drums. This was my introduction to the bushmeat trade and the start for me of a long journey. Because of the tsetse fly Ghana produced few cattle and those few came down from the Sahael. Sheep and goats were kept mainly for bride price. Bush meat was the nation's main source of protein and as the population grew so did the demand for it. During my 20 years there the population quadrupled and more; in fact, I was once invited to a celebration when an important chief celebrated the birth of his 100th child. I never found out how many were his wives but all dwelt in a vast palace.

So as the forests were felled to satisfy the insatiable demands of the timber industry, their denizens lost their homes and travelled to market, dead if they were lucky, to fill someone's soup pot. In those distant days up to 40 lorry loads of assorted antelopes used to arrive on a daily basis, again the lucky ones arrived dead, salted and smoked. The less fortunate arrived to satisfy the demand for fresh meat, alive, with their legs broken. Only their beautiful, desperate eyes revealed their agony and terror, the memory of those eyes haunts me still. Meat was not the only thing the animals supplied. Elephant ivory was most beautifully carved by skilled craftsmen working in tiny, dark shacks; nothing of an elephant was wasted, the meat was consumed to the last scrap, the tail hairs were woven into bracelets, but in those days it was the ears that were most valuable. Monkeys and chimps were exported to the laboratories of the West and their babies were hawked around as pets and few survived. Grey parrots hung upside down suspended by their legs from bamboo poles, screaming their misery; many were exported and huge numbers died en route.

For more than 10 years I worked in my spare time for the Ghana Game Department and travelled much of the country. I would enquire of the local chiefs what animals they had left and the invariable answer was that the animals had "travelled" and they had no more meat. When I enquired where had the animals travelled I was told they had gone over the hills, over the Volta, to Togo or the Ivory

Coast. When I suggested that perhaps their journey was involuntary and by lorry to the nearest big market they would shake their heads sadly and agree. Thus it was that by the time I came to leave Ghana and move to Kenya with my husband, I had seen with my own eyes how quickly extinction could happen on a local basis.

Antelope now came to market one by one and seldom. Much of the beautiful forests were destroyed and the great trees were stacked in the worlds' timber markets and the lovely birds and fascinating beasts were no more. But surely Kenya, with its huge parks, flourishing tourist industry and great herds of cattle to satisfy the need for meat, would be very different. And so it was in those early days when the demand for bushmeat and land for growing crops was not as great as it is now; but with one mega-exception, the black rhino. It was an animal I had then never even seen, and certainly not thought about, but it was about to turn my life around.

Oil in Saudi Arabia had brought unexpected wealth to Yemen with the result that the demand for rhino-handle daggers had escalated vastly. In that country all men wear a dagger and the status symbol dagger needs to have a handle made of rhino horn; it is the thing you must have to prove your worth. The shavings from the making of the handles went east to China mainly for use in traditional medicine. The belief in the virtues of rhino horn to heal goes back thousands of years. The main use is to reduce fever and it seems if you boil anything for long enough that contains keratin, your hair and finger nail clippings for instance, it will have a very tiny effect, but far more effective and cheaper it is to take an aspirin. For these ridiculous reasons the price of rhino horn started to rise in the maddest fashion till it was worth even more than gold in some countries in the Far East. And rhinos started to die in their hundreds and then in their thousands. You could drive round Kenya's so beautiful parks and follow the vultures from one desecrated corpse to that of the next. From each, the horns had been hacked and the once magnificent and beautiful creature left to rot. In a matter of years, Kenya's population of many thousands was reduced to below 400. What to do? It seemed well-guarded sanctuaries for a specific purpose, the natural breeding of wild black rhinos, was the only remaining hope. Thus the Ngare Sergoi Sanctuary was created on Lewa Downs, a vast cattle ranch in the north of Kenya owned by the Craig family. And it succeeded thanks to the help of many people and in a very important degree thanks to the members of AAZK and Bowling for Rhinos and the incredible amount of money that has been raised.

So the Sanctuary grew from the initial 5,000 acres to 10,000 and then in 1995 it became the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy protecting an area of some 65,000 acres which now includes the Government owned Ngare Ndare Forest. This vast increase in area was needed as rhinos will breed if given security. And security was always our total top priority. So Lewa progressed from being a cattle ranch to being an area where two highly endangered animals were breeding well; black rhinos and Grevvy's zebra of which we have about 25% of the entire world's population. Beneath the umbrella of these two species, the whole range of species indigenous to the area also prospered. Because our ideas were working, thanks to the costly security we employed, they were copied elsewhere and sanctuaries were created on both private and government land; both the government and the private sector working well together on this. One side-effect was that Lewa became a huge employer of labour, the biggest in the Meru district. This, plus our building of schools and clinics and other schemes to improve the welfare of our neighbours, meant we had very good relations with them. This is vital for the success of any enterprise concerning the protection of potentially dangerous species. In the meantime, the horrific wave of poaching that had so seriously decimated the rhino populations of most of Africa had not touched South Africa. Her populations of both black and white rhino had been barely effected and they thrived, both in the national parks and on private reserves where they were used not just as a tourist attraction, but also for trophy hunting. This apparent immunity from the rhino crisis sweeping the rest of the continent, and also decimating the three species of rhino found in India and southeast Asia, made those in South Africa responsible for the security of rhinos on both public and private land, somewhat complacent; never a very wise attitude.

Then three years ago the Chinese president visited most countries in Africa. Unaware and avaricious governments throughout the continent welcomed him with open arms. Here was cash undreamed of and no questions asked. Agreements were signed with a sad disregard to possible consequences. Oil, mineral rights, timber concessions, agricultural land and rights of residence have been handed over in return for doomed or shoddy infrastructure projects, all built by Chinese labour so not even unemployment is improved. Damian Thompson writing in the U.K. Daily Telegraph recently wrote "Africa's future has been quietly settled for it. Something close to slavery is back - all thanks to China". Even in the small town 50 km away, where I shop, there are now five Chinese shops and an

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ever-growing number of Chinese residents. They are not short of cash and at the top of their “wish list” are rhino horn and ivory, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. The Big Men have also moved in--the Barons of the illegal trade in wildlife which is huge-- rivaling the drugs and the arms trade. The three go hand in hand. Last year, this country lost over 450 rhino, and that means the ones that were found. I have just been told that a further 13 were killed in the Kruger National Park over Christmas. At this moment my neighbours are searching frantically for a pregnant white cow gone missing. Three years ago I said to friends and neighbours who had rhinos “guard them well” and was laughed at. Now they say, “how did you know”? But no knowledge was available to me that was hidden from them, but people prefer to close their eyes sometimes, and governments have higher priorities than to guard their heritage, yet tourism is both a major source of revenue and of much needed, well-paid employment.

Tragically, it is not only rhinos that are dying, it is estimated that 100 elephants die per day throughout the continent because of the rise in the demand for ivory. Most of Asia's tigers have died because of the demand for their bones for medicine, as much use as is rhino horn, probably less, so now Africa's lions are next on the list. It seems the great apes are also wanted as status symbol ‘bush meat’. Whatever Africa has, and should cherish, China wants and seemingly will get. So what to do? The Governments of the West should be taking a hard look at the rape of the planet that is taking place instead of begging for financial aid. Fortunately there are zoos that seem to care more about trying to save endangered species and educating children about what is happening than in making huge profits. Better still there are zoo keepers who care a lot. I know because it has been my good fortune to have met so many of them. Better still, they are trained in people-skills and communicating. To you I say, go out and tell your States and cities and children what is happening to their world. People in politics will listen if votes are involved. Why are no Senators or Governors ex-zoo keepers? We need to get our local Chinese populations to understand this dire situation and help get the message through to China. Places like Lewa can do a holding action until you can change attitudes. Remember that when the last rhino in Africa or Indonesia dies in agony with a bullet in its guts, or dies in a zoo of old age, 40 million years of evolution goes with it. Forever. And with the passing of the great mammals, a splendour will have gone out of our world and cannot return.