

## Graham Child, and the emergence of a new paradigm of wildlife conservation

Tribute by Brian Child\* and Ingrid Child

Born June 6 1936, in Bulawayo, formerly Rhodesia  
Died December 2 2016, in Cape Town, SA

\*corresponding author: bchild@geog.ufl.edu



Graham Child was born in Bulawayo, Rhodesia, in 1936. Educated at Plumtree School he won the national Young Conservationist Award and then studied Zoology at the University of Cape Town with prestigious scholarships from Vacuum Oil and Beit. He was one of a handful of rugged young men who rescued wildlife from the floodwaters of Lake Kariba during Operation Noah (Beit Research Fellowship) completing his PhD on the effects of wildlife over-population on shrinking habitats. He married Diana Thomas, and had three children Brian, Ingrid and Susan.

Graham grew up in remote field stations,

learning Ndebele so fluently that he spoke it in his sleep. He absorbed the work ethic and culture of effective civil service under the tutelage of his father, Harold Child, a District Commissioner who survived two years on the Western Front and played a prominent role in rural development including local peoples' agriculture. As a boarder at Plumtree School, way out in the bush, Graham learnt that a man is measured by what he does, not by what he says.

Throughout his career Graham encouraged people at all levels and of all races to strive for a new way of conserving wildlife, by owning it, managing it with knowledge and responsibility, making it as profitable as possible, and by ensuring that this profit was returned to the people who lived with the wildlife. His path-breaking ideas are captured in two books. *Managing Protected Areas in the Tropics*, (1986) which he co-authored and reflects his professionalism for wildlife and people. *A Zimbabwean Success*, (1995) encapsulates Graham Child's paradigm-shifting conceptualization of wildlife conservation in southern Africa and even today remains pragmatic and visionary.

Graham spent more than twenty years in the field. He was the first ecologist in the game department (1959), was seconded to supervise the building of the Bulawayo Museum as the Keeper of Mammology (1961-65), and then played a prominent role in building wildlife agencies in Botswana (1965-71), Saudi Arabia (1988-1993) and Zimbabwe (1971-86).

As an FAO specialist, Graham spent six years establishing the biological baseline for Chobe National Park (NP) Moremi and much of Botswana, and contributed to the development of Botswana's Department of Wildlife, National Parks and Tourism. He spent many weeks in the field with his two faithful bushmen, returning fit, dirty and happy when his drum of water ran out—he allowed himself one cup a day for hygiene. He often recounted his epiphany regarding the absurdity of modern conservation laws—it came as a result of a lecture from an old bushman who he had caught snaring springbok.

In Zimbabwe, in the mid-1960s, a Commission of Enquiry led by George Petrides recommended the amalgamation of game and parks departments, and the professionalization of the combined department along scientific principles. A youthful Graham (35) was appointed to head the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management. Here, he honed his capabilities as a far-sighted administrator and agent of change. Zimbabwe became a global example of professional

protected area management. Graham introduced his deep knowledge of ecosystem conservation and people into legislation and policy. With Fraser he wrote the groundbreaking Parks and Wild Life Act in 1975. They placed the Department under a board that no longer included civil servants and, establishing protected area categories, ensured each park was guided by a short policy document. Believing that successful outcomes emerged from clear policy and devolved authority, Graham encapsulated his philosophy and bold ideas in a series of policy documents, ranging from elephant and rhino management, to quelea control, fisheries, crocodile farming, game ranching, game capture, community development and education.

As a young man, Graham recognized that proprietorship was the cardinal issue for wildlife conservation. Established norms were not working in Africa where agriculture, domestic livestock and human populations were expanding rapidly. Graham played a bold and catalytic role in challenging these top-down approaches, replacing them with policies to empower the people who lived with wildlife, including landholders, communities and park managers. It is not a coincidence that Southern Africa is both the only place where proprietorship is central to wildlife legislation and practice, and is the only place, outside the US, where wildlife has recovered so dramatically.

He was confident that the future of wildlife lay in making it more, not less, valuable—provided wildlife was owned, managed and benefited the people who lived with it. His beliefs were ahead of the times. Attending Parliament proudly in his khaki National Parks shorts uniform, Graham persuaded Parliament to return money from hunting and culling of wildlife directly back to communities—well before Independence. It is no accident that Zimbabwe pioneered private wildlife conservation and then community conservation, with the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) becoming a globally iconic template in the early 1990s.

Graham's influence spread well beyond Zimbabwe, always through collaborative approaches. In the 1960s, Graham was the vice-chair of SARCUSS, a group of Wildlife Directors and scientists who met each year. Unconvinced by the status quo, they introduced radical

new legislation in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique and the provinces of South Africa to devolve the ownership of wildlife back to farmers and, later, communities. As one of two Regional Councilors for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), he convened major workshops at the World Parks Congress in Bali (1982) and Caracas (1992), convincing many conservationists that use and trade of wildlife was a powerful and legitimate means for transforming land back to wildlife. Thus, Zimbabwe's (and Graham's) ideas about protected area categories, parks and people, sustainable use and community based natural resource management were shared globally.

Graham may have won few conservation accolades, but he led a revolution in parks and wildlife in southern Africa. As a field man with a PhD, he questioned the status quo, and changed it. Zim Parks thrived under his leadership, with Graham providing a clear conservation philosophy and delegating authority to park managers. He insisted on scientific management of habitats well before biodiversity was a watchword, authorizing the culling of thousands of elephant, but he was equally passionate about the well-being of his staff, built training into the DNA of the department, and fought to provide decent housing and schooling to all 2,500 employees in cash strapped times. By empowering neighbourhoods of farmers to self-regulate, he anticipated Elinor Ostrom's famous principles about collective action by at least 15 years. As Director, he also did away with many government controls and fees, believing them to be a hindrance to conservation.

Living on the banks of the Chobe, camping in the Kalahari or visiting field stations during our school holidays (as Dad did religiously every year) we were privileged to share with him his love and understanding of Africa, parks, its people and its ecology. His legacy endures in his far-sighted approach to the management of parks and the conservation of wildlife on state, private and communal lands, and in the friendships and pride of the people who served in the "Department".