



PHOTOS BY: PAOLO TORCHIO

# Bones of Popular Black Rhino Preserved at Kenya Museum

**K**enya's National Museum in Nairobi is famous for its bones, from fossilized skulls of human ancestors to the fully preserved skeleton of Ahmed, the only elephant protected by presidential decree.

In 1970, school children wrote letters to Kenya president Jomo Kenyatta to protect the big tusker from poachers. Ahmed was declared a living legend, and given armed guards. One morning in 1974, guards found Ahmed dead. He was 55, and died of natural causes.



DELTA WILLIS is the author of *The Hominid Gang, Behind the Scenes in the Search for Human Origins*, which featured a glimpse of famous fossils kept at the Louis Leakey Memorial Institute for African Prehistory.

**ITALY'S NEW AMBASSADOR TO KENYA, ALBERTO PIERI, SPOKE AT THE EVENT, SAYING, "KARANJA WAS ICONIC AND A LEGEND."**

On Christmas Day in 2014, another great pachyderm died, a black rhino known as Karanja. He was 43, and the oldest rhino in the Maasai Mara, recognized by two long pin-sharp horns. Popular with tourists, Karanja was relaxed around vehicles, and much photographed. In an era of rampant poaching, Karanja was heralded for dying only of natural causes.

Photographer Paolo Torchio, a frequent contributor to *Swara* and former member of the Editorial Board, worked with his wife Magali Manconi to

appeal to the Italian Ambassador Mauro Massoni, who approved a proposal to help preserve the skeleton. The process, a collaboration between the Italian embassy, the Italian Cultural Institute, and the museum, took over three years. First, the bones needed to be entirely free of flesh. Like many natural history museums around the world, the National Museums of Kenya Osteology Section uses *Dermestes maculatus*, or hide beetles, to clean some specimens for skeleton preparation.

"Yes, that is the name of the beetle;"



**TOP:** Doctor Ogeto confirming correct position for the heavy skull of the famous rhino.

**BELOW:** The museum team during a difficult moment, to correctly assemble foot bones.

said Dr. Ogeto Mwebi, Head of Osteology Section at the Museum's Zoology Department; "However, we did not control other creatures from participating. Common fly maggots and other insects participated, too."

I once witnessed this process in a tower of the American Museum of Natural History, where an employee kept checking containers that resembled ovens, as if watching to see if his cake was done. This natural but rather grim process took a year on the carcass of Karanja, and was briefly described to assembled guests at the museum on October 31, when Americans celebrate Halloween with skeletons.

Italy's new ambassador to Kenya, Alberto Pieri, spoke at the event, saying, "Karanja was iconic and a legend."

The embassy and the Italian Institute of Culture heard about the news and supported its preservation." The embassy provided 300,000 Kenya



**TOP: Day One!** All the bones on the floor and you must start from one of them!

**BELOW: At halfway of the mounting,** we can at least guess the shape of the final skeleton.

shillings (\$3,000) for mounting of the skeleton, and pledged to collaborate in other areas. "Kenya has incredible natural heritage whose conservation success is not only on behalf of its people but also tourism and development," he said.

Now Karanja's skeleton is on display, in front of a white rhino, so one can appreciate the difference in size. (White are larger.) His horns were turned

over to the Kenya Wildlife Service; the longer horn weighed five kilograms while the shorter one was three and a half kilograms. The week of the event, China reversed a 25 year-old ban on rhino horn and tiger parts for medicinal sales. Karanja was lucky to live a full life. [China has since postponed implementing the new regulation that would have allowed the use of tiger bone and rhino horn by hospitals, and domestic trade in antique tiger and rhino products].

With excellent Italian wines, we toasted this creature that has lived on earth for 40 million years, the initiative to honor Karanja, and Paolo Torchio's photo exhibit. Because the reception was hosted by the Italian Cultural Institute, we enjoyed delectable hors d'oeuvres and pasta, amid conversations with scientists, ambassadors, and environmental journalists. Then I found my way to the courtyard where a life-sized sculpture of Ahmed stands, to pay my respects. ●