



The Early History Of Kenya's National Parks By Dame Daphne Sheldrick

Over 60 years ago Kenya's first generation of pioneer wardens, Bill Woodley, Peter Jenkins and David Sheldrick, travelled the main Nairobi-Mombasa road to Mtito Andei, then just a dusty dirt road, to begin the daunting task of transforming untouched and largely unexplored and inhospitable arid semi-desert wasteland into the famous National Park that Tsavo is today.

It was in those times an unattractive tangle of dense thicket, which was home to thousands of black rhino, un-friendly elephants, which had suffered years of hunting and poaching by humans, and lions that had always had man-eating tendencies, whilst the buffalo were extremely dangerous when encountered at close quarters. Added to this Tsavo was home to a multitude of poisonous snakes, scorpions and other stinging insects, bird eating spiders that leapt up at one if disturbed, not to mention the ever present threat of deadly malaria.

A few early European explorers had ventured through Tsavo and the Taru Desert on their quest to reach the hinterland – men such as the German missionaries, Krapf and Rebmann, who were the first white men to see the snows of Kilimanjaro and Mt. Kenya in the early 1800's, Lord Lugard who walked up the Sabaki/Galana river (and had his finger bitten by a crocodile at what is now Lugard's Falls), Joseph Thompson who arrived some years later, and so graphically described the wilderness to the world and who befriended the Masai, Colonel Patterson who oversaw the laying of the railway line, and who shot the two notorious man-eating lions which devoured almost 100 Indian railway workers.

When Tsavo was first gazetted as a Park in 1948, the wildlife of the area remained all but invisible until one stumbled upon them at close quarters, following narrow elephant trails that wound through dense Commiphora dominated thicket, sweltering in the intense heat that seemed bent on sucking every morsel of moisture from tired torn human bodies. There were no roads for Tsavo's pioneer wardens to follow, no aircraft from which to take a look at the challenges that faced them, no hand-held radios to keep in touch with one another and base camp, no telephones or

other mod-cons at their disposal – just one vehicle, some old fashioned ex-army tents that did not zip shut, and a haversack to carry their few personal items. Their work-force consisted of a handful of raw labourers armed with only pangas (machetes), jembes (spades) and shovels to carve out the very first tracks leading to who knows where.

The first task they faced was to walk on foot for two years in punishing temperatures; restricted in the dry season for they had to carry what water they could. Just two permanent rivers served the giant Park covering 8,000 square miles in extent. During wet seasons they could venture further, drinking from the same waterholes that the animals used, and using alum and natural roots to clear it of mud and animal faeces. The early wardens were hardened naturalists, all proficient riflemen, capable of stopping an elephant, rhino, buffalo or lion at close quarters for they learnt how to shoot the moment they could walk. Added to this the first senior wardens had seen active service during the Second World War. Few of today's wildlife personnel have any perception of the sweat and toil of their predecessors who managed to create a National Park of which Kenya could be proud in just 30 years.

Perhaps two who should be most celebrated for the actual creation of Kenya's National Parks, is the then serving Chief Game Warden, Archie Ritchie, and Colonel Mervyn Cowie, who became the first Director of the National Parks. Although the concept of National Parks to preserve the country's irreplaceable wildlife heritage was first mooted in the early 1930's, the war years put everything on hold until Archie Ritchie along with Colonel Mervyn Cowie took up the mantle again in 1939 once the war was over. In fact, it was Archie Ritchie, himself a Civil Servant, who contributed most to the success of the early National Parks, which were once recognized as the finest in the world. It was he who had the wisdom and foresight to insist that National Parks must be divorced entirely from political manipulation, independent of Government and overseen instead by a powerful Board of Trustees drawn from all walks of life.

Bill Woodley and Peter Jenkins were the first Junior Assistant Wardens to be recruited for the National Parks service, aged 18 and 19 respectively recently having left the Prince of Wales school in Nairobi. Their salary was meagre by today's standards, just K. Shs. 500/- per month flat with no allowances. (It was Peter Jenkins who had won the international competition for the design of the first National Parks' emblem – a rhino standing by a thorn tree with Mt. Kenya as a back-drop.) The year was 1948, and the two first Junior Assistant Wardens served initially in the newly created Nairobi National Park under its Warden, Ken Beaton, who became well known for "A Warden's Diary" written weekly in the East African Standard newspaper.

On the 19th April 1948 Bill Woodley and Peter Jenkins were sent to Tsavo National Park to work under its first Warden who was a man named Stevens, who had established a rustic base camp at a place known as "Steve's Hill" in what is now Tsavo West National Park. He had no previous experience of wildlife or camping in very primitive conditions in an old ex-Army tent into which any lion could walk, didn't suit him at all. Needless to say, it was not long before he threw in the towel, leaving Peter Jenkins and Billy Woodley in limbo wondering what to do next with their handful of raw labourers.

Ken Beaton was then sent down to pull the chestnuts from the fire, his arrival coinciding with the employment of another pioneer warden, Major David Sheldrick who had been head-hunted specifically for the Tsavo task by Archie Ritchie himself. Following discussions with various District Commissioners and the Board of Trustees, Ken Beaton recommended that the giant 8,000 sq. mile Tsavo National Park be divided into East and West for ease of administration, and that David Sheldrick was to shoulder responsibility for the development of the more problematical section east of the railway line, now known as Tsavo East, with Bill Woodley assigned to him as his Junior Assistant Warden. Major Tabs Taberer was employed to take over Tsavo West, i.e. everything that lay west of the railway line with Peter Jenkins as his Junior Assistant.

Gazettement of the boundaries of Tsavo had been a lengthy process since claims from all its neighbouring tribes had to be taken into account. These were (1) the Masai (2) the Wakamba (3) the Orma (4) the Taita (5) the Giriama and (6) the Duruma and what was eventually set aside for wildlife in 1949 was the only sizeable chunk of "un-wanted" land that the colonial Government could set aside to accommodate a sizeable population of elephants and rhino, as well as most of Kenya's indigenous species with the exception of wildebeest which were well represented in the Nairobi National Park.

Tsavo West, encompassing 3,000 square miles, was scenically stunning. Overlooking recent lava flows and volcanic cones, as well as the crystal clear waters of Mzima Springs bubbling from the lava in the midst of an arid land, the Chyulu range of hills were of recent volcanic origin clothed in emergent forest. Therefore, notwithstanding the wildlife it harboured, about which little was known other than it was known as the home range of mainly bull elephants, the magnificent scenery alone warranted its National Park status. The first Headquarters was established on the slopes of a low hill at Kamboyo within easy reach of railhead at Mtito Andei, commanding breath-taking views of a spectacularly stunning landscape.

Tsavo East was 5,000 square miles of flat, dense scrubland thicket, penetrated by just one old hunting track that ended abruptly about 20 miles from Voi township at a place aptly called Heartbreak Camp. David Sheldrick was 30 years old in 1939, having commanded the 5th Battalion Kings African Rifles during the war and served with distinction in Abyssinia and Burma. At the time that the post of Warden of Tsavo came up, David was actually engaged in taking the Aga Khan and his Begum to Dar es Salaam. Archie Ritchie persuaded Colonel Cowie to wait for his return before advertising the Warden slot for Tsavo, knowing that he would be perfect for the job.

David Sheldrick had at his disposal just one vehicle, some tents and a handful of labourers when he established the eastern sector of Tsavo's first base at Ndololo (now a public campsite) by the seasonal Voi River. His first task was to build a kiln in which to fire some clay bricks to construct a secure armoury for his guns and any recovered ivory and rhino horn. Enviously, he eyed the nearest small hill within reach of Voi town and railhead which would be ideal for an elevated Headquarters that would bring some respite from the punishing heat, but the hill was beyond the Park's boundary, owned by the Voi Sisal Estate. Sweltering at Ndololo, David Sheldrick initiated negotiations with the Sisal Estate to exchange Mazinga Hill for a patch of the Park on the south bank of the Voi River more suitable for sisal growing. This was a lengthy process which took two full years and during those two years, from the Park's first base camp at Ndololo on the Voi River, he and Bill Woodley set about exploring their domain on foot, each with a trusty .416 rifle slung over a shoulder, accompanied by a captured Mliangulu poacher as their guide and some porters to carry basic rations.

They soon discovered that Tsavo East was the traditional hunting ground of the Waliangulu tribe who resided just beyond its Eastern boundary in Giriama country, for they came across the carcasses of numerous poached elephants, all with tusks missing. Elephants had long been entwined in Waliangulu culture. Tribesmen hunted them using giant bows to fire poisoned arrows, there being no known antidote for the Acokanthera poison purchased from traditional Giriama poison makers. They boiled up the bark and roots from specific Acokanthera trees that were more toxic than normal, detected by the dead birds that were usually underneath them.

Aside from the elephant poaching, David Sheldrick faced another major challenge, and that was how to cross the Galana river and gain easier access to the 3,000 square miles of his Park which lay on the North bank. The only access to the North was a long roundabout route via Kitui, so Bill Woodley was assigned the task of undertaking foot patrols from that end, on one occasion almost dying of thirst when his vehicle got bogged in sand whilst attempting to cross a

lugga (sand river). By then David Sheldrick had managed to persuade the authorities to provide him with additional equipment, a lorry, a small tractor, and also another Assistant Warden in the person of John Lawrence, who would supervise the construction of a causeway across the Galana at Lugards Falls. Work began on this in the early 50's and the causeway took a full year to complete, for it was a mammoth task. Today, 60 years on, it continues to serve its purpose making the Northern Area more accessible during Tsavo's long dry seasons when the river is at low ebb.

David recruited for his first anti-poaching force a nucleus of trusted soldiers with whom he had served during the war, using captured poachers as trackers and guides. Meanwhile, the land exchange he had sought finally materialized, so Mazinga Hill became available as the site for Tsavo East's first permanent Headquarters. While building was taking place, he set about recruiting raw tribesmen from the pastoral people of the North – men who were skilled at tracking, fearless and brave, and hardened to harsh conditions, it having been found that rangers recruited locally colluded with the poachers. He sought new rangers from the ranks of Samburu, Turkana, Rendille, Somali, Gabbra and Rendille tribesmen who were then trained in Tsavo by him along military lines and finally moulded into a force the likes of which has never been seen again and which provided the blue-print for all other Parks in Africa.

For a full year, all work came to a standstill while the anti-poaching campaign tackled the poaching menace under his command. It took the input of two Game Department units, two crack National Park Field Forces under the leadership of Bill Woodley and Peter Jenkins, secondment of a Pilot and Plane from the Police Airwing, a Police Prosecutor to deal with all Court Cases and high ranking CID Officers assigned to try and deal with the Coastal middlemen whilst the Army supplied radios and other vital equipment. The anti-poaching campaign of the fifties stamped poaching out completely within Tsavo National Park.

Then came the great drought of the 1960's, which took a heavy toll on rhinos along certain stretches of the Athi river, some 300 dying before the rains eventually broke on the 20th September 1961, triggering monumental floods, that changed the beach at Malindi forever, and left the river wider by 300 yards on each side. During the height of the floods, David Sheldrick and his work force were stranded on the North bank of the river for some 3 months, all supplies having to be ferried across in a small rubber dingy attached to a stout cable anchored to trees on either side.

However, during the 60's, peace was restored and not one elephant was poached within the Park's boundaries. Moreover, the rhinos seemed just as plentiful despite the loss of some 300. This was a decade for understanding and research, for the further development of the infrastructure and road systems, the completion of the five main entrance gates to the Park, the construction of the Aruba Self Help Lodge abutting the Aruba Dam and the provision of additional permanent water sources utilizing ground resources. This was necessary to relieve pressure on the Galana and Tsavo rivers during Tsavo's long dry seasons, and spread the wildlife load more equitably for tourism.

Peter Jenkins was transferred to also work under David Sheldrick in Tsavo East, charged with the task of developing the Northern Area Headquarters at Ithumba, where he would be based, and installing tourist tracks and signboards to bring the Northern Area into production, all of which was done extremely efficiently and to perfection. David Sheldrick designed and constructed an up-market game blind on the slopes of the Yatta Plateau, overlooking the Tiva and the vastness of the Northern wilderness which would be available for the more discerning tourists. He always envisaged that the Northern Area be kept pristine and exclusive, a wilderness which would come into its own for elite tourism conducted by professionals conversant with the bush and its hazards. Safaris into the North demanded two vehicles for safety reasons, and accompanied by a National Park Ranger Guide equipped with a radio to be able to communicate with the Voi Headquarters should an emergency arise.

Bill Woodley was promoted to Warden of the Mountain and Aberdare National Parks, based at Nyeri, Major Tabs Taberer handed over Tsavo West to Tuffy Marshall and was transferred to the Amboseli National Reserve with David Lovat Smith as his Assistant Warden. Independence came in 1963 and soon Colonel Cowie's position as Director was taken over by Perez Olindo. Peter Jenkins was also promoted, tasked with rebuilding a broken down Meru National Reserve, which had recently been awarded National Park status. New faces appeared on the Board of Trustees, many of them political appointees with vested interests other than overseeing the welfare of the country's wildlife. A period of rapid change and transition was taking place; white-collar corruption was becoming a way of life, then involving ivory and rhino horn, so poaching re-surfaced again, this time involving high ranking politically protected middlemen ivory dealers. Meanwhile, elephants from outlying areas sought refuge in the safety of Tsavo, eventually overtaking its carrying capacity in terms of their species. Grasslands replaced the dense Commiphora thickets throughout large swathes of the Southern Section of the Park, although the Northern Area remained as it had always been – dense Commiphora thicket. Grazing species multiplied south of the Galana, buffalo emerging as a dominant grazer of the new grasslands, and new species such as oribi, sable and coastal Topi appeared.

There were calls for the legal culling of elephants South African style, something that David Sheldrick vehemently opposed, for he could see the sort of Pandora's box this would create due to circumstances prevailing at the time. Also, he had undertaken his own research during the decade of the sixties, delving into all the old explorer's early records of the habitat as it was 100 years ago to better understand the changes taking place, marking and monitoring specific elephants to map the extent of their ranges, un-covering the root systems of grasses and trees to understand the impact they had on a changing water table, and studying all aspects of the area under his control. He also learned a great deal by rearing and ultimately rehabilitating orphans of misfortune - elephants, rhinos, buffaloes many of the antelope species; the first person to understand the very human aspect of elephants. David Sheldrick was ahead of his time. He knew more about Tsavo and its complex rhythms of life than any visiting scientist, and he knew more about the very human nature of elephants than all others, having hand-reared their orphaned young. Hence, when the scientist who called for the artificial culling of the elephants challenged the Trustees by saying that "either Sheldrick goes, or I go", the Trustees said apologetically, "Well, we fear it will have to be you, for we can replace a scientist, but we could never replace David Sheldrick!"

The end result was that the elephants were spared and instead Nature stepped in to do the culling, and did so much more efficiently, quietly, and without turning the entire Park upside down. 10,000 mainly female and sub adult elephants died of malnutrition within just one drought year in the early 70's – the number that the scientist had recommended should be artificially culled. Nature distilled the population through natural selection, putting it into decline by targeting the females, the elderly, the sick, weak and the maimed, creating generation gaps and thus relieve browsing pressure on the habitat.

In 1976, the Government suddenly abolished the National Parks' Board of Trustees overnight, and seized control, amalgamating the National Parks Service with the Government Game Department, two organizations that had very different roles. Whereas the Game Department had been responsible mainly for the control of wildlife in human settlement, the National Parks personnel had always been tasked with conserving and protecting wildlife within the Protected Areas. The result of the merger proved disastrous, the new Government Wildlife Conservation and Management Dept., (as it was called) very soon earning the title of "The Wildlife Poaching and Mis-Management Dept.". There followed 3 decades of wholesale in-house slaughter of elephants and rhino for ivory and horn, perpetrated by Somali shifta armed with automatic rifles, and also by the Wardens and Rangers themselves, David Sheldrick having been moved from Tsavo, supposedly to head the Planning Unit of the new organization. He would be based in Nairobi, charged with overseeing the development of all the country's National Reserves, but he never lived to

fulfil this task, for he died suddenly of a massive heart attack 6 months later on the 13th June, 1977. It was then that his widow, Daphne, was given permission to reside within the Nairobi National Park, and continue her work with the orphans, mainly elephant and rhino calves, who were coming in thick and fast due to the poaching.

David Sheldrick left Tsavo East National Park fully developed, with 1,087 kms of tourist roads, 853 kms of administrative roads and 287 kms of anti-poaching tracks, every vehicle, all heavy machinery, every borehole etc., in perfect working order, stores filled with spare parts, and staff uniforms to last the Park for the next 5 years and a loyal Field Force of which he had been inordinately proud. However, he also complained vociferously that Tsavo East had been allocated just K. Shs. 110,000 by the new powers-that-be for the half year July – December 1976, pointing out that it was impossible to maintain standards on such a paltry sum. 20,000 elephants remained in Tsavo East when he left in 1976, but the next three decades reduced the elephant population to just 6,000 within the entire ecosystem, an area twice the size of the Park itself, where once there had been 45,000.

1990 saw the installation of Dr Richard Leakey as Director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, which replaced the corrupt and infamous WCMD organization. It was he who managed to bring the poaching under control within the Protected Areas and restore some credibility to Kenya's conservation image. However, World Bank funding provided a huge Headquarters, and an unwieldy bureaucracy which has been the organisation's Achilles Heel. The rest is known recent history – an impressive veneer to the organization at the Headquarter level, but little emphasis given to the field. Although the Government has allocated impressive sums of money to the Wildlife Service, this has been spent on "window dressing", leaving the field, and "the product" on which Kenya's lucrative Tourism Industry is based, still wanting.