

Lucky Mavrandonis—a man with a passion, purpose and vision

Born: 23 February 1944

Died: 28 January 2018

Tribute by Sue Downie

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In Greek the nickname for Apostolos (which means ‘apostle’) is Apostolaki or Laki, but from a very young age Lucky Mavrandonis showed a strong, independent, rebellious personality and insisted that his name was spelt the English way. Born to parents who had emigrated from the Greek island of Lesbos to Benoni, South Africa, Lucky had an extraordinarily full life and accomplished a great deal, including for the environment. It is my eternal honour and privilege to have been a close part of Lucky’s life for over 42 years.

Lucky started school at the age of four, matriculated at 15 and graduated with a degree in Pharmacy (B.Sc. Pharm) from Rhodes University at just 20. He not only excelled academically but also in athletics as a sprinter. He learnt that his success depended on his own efforts and approached every challenge, project and life with the attitude that the harder he worked the luckier and more knowledgeable he would become.

I first met Lucky in 1976 when he interviewed me for the position of production pharmacist at a small multinational pharmaceutical company. In 1978, as managing director, he started an innovative conservation marketing campaign to highlight the plight of the cheetah. Doctors received information about cheetahs and were informed that by prescribing our product to patients they would be supporting the translocation of cheetah from Namibia to Pilanesberg Game Reserve. The campaign was so successful that each year we highlighted a different endangered species such as pangolin, roan antelope, black rhino, donated a percentage of profits to NGOs working to conserve them. In 1987, realising that habitat loss was the biggest

problem, we launched a campaign, in collaboration with Dr Anthony Hall-Martin of SANParks, Danie van der Walt (Executive Producer of the environmental TV programme 50/50) and the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF), to raise funds to expand the land under protection of two national parks (NP) in South Africa.

In 1991 we were directly involved in the return of a young female black rhino, Shibula, from Lisbon Zoo to a NP in South Africa, which had a huge impact on our lives. This re-release of a black rhino from a zoo into the wild was a world first. For the next ten years we visited Shibula several times and saw her first two calves shortly after they were born. During these visits we accompanied the rangers tracking rhinos in the Park and sometimes saw all of them together. When we told Anthony about this, he seemed surprised by their social interaction and asked us to write reports on these observations. Subsequently, during many years of monitoring black rhinos we observed them socializing often and for several hours at a time. In our opinion black rhinos are not solitary and we have many hours of observation, photographs and video as evidence.

In 2001, a couple of years after retiring from our business in Johannesburg and moving to our farm in north-eastern South Africa, the DSWF requested photographs of Shibula’s third calf, on the tenth anniversary of Shibula’s relocation from the zoo. By then she was completely integrated into the population of wild rhinos—an incredible conservation success story. After a discussion with Anthony, now retired from SANParks, we applied to his successor Mike Knight, for permission to monitor Shibula and other black rhinos in two NPs. We undertook tracking the rhinos in the field, while Anthony would do aerial monitoring. This was an inconspicuous start and not much was expected of two retired pharmacists, beyond finding spoor and dung! However, Anthony and Mike did not take into account Lucky’s passion and determination to overcome every obstacle and challenge, and to become the best at whatever he did. We spent 14 years regularly tracking and monitoring four black rhino populations. Very soon we knew and could identify every individual rhino and built up a vast amount of data about each and every one of them. We made an effort to find and observe the animals without them being aware of our presence, so that we could record, photograph and video natural black rhino behaviour.

An extract from a letter to DSWF by Anthony, 18 February 2012: “The monitoring of reintroduced black rhinoceros populations by Lucky and Sue has produced an impressive body of biological information of great value to science and practical conservation.”

An extract from Mike’s letter on 13 January 2012: “Lucky and Sue’s unwavering dedication and attention to detail surpasses any other such rhino monitoring project in SANParks, and dare I say for any other state protected area in the country.”

In 2010, Lucky initiated, a discussion with SANParks senior rangers about how to deal with poaching in our project areas, which was sponsored by the DSWF and ourselves.

Another long-term project was closer to home, at our farm on the Mpumalanga escarpment in north-eastern South Africa. The farm borders a forestry company’s pine plantations. The farm is largely unfenced and wildlife can move freely between the farm and neighbouring pine plantations. As a first priority Lucky ensured that we planted about 2,000 indigenous trees and shrubs around the house, and then we started researching the best way to permanently remove alien wattles, gums and bug weed. There was no short-term solution, but regular effort and hard follow-up work over a ten year period finally paid off. The old farm land has been restored, and has become a sanctuary for free-ranging antelope, of different species, as well as for predators such as brown hyena and leopard.

Lucky was never afraid to stand up for what he believed in. He fought tenaciously to get the forestry company to clear pine and gums from water courses in our catchment area, but sadly it took 20 years for them to grudgingly take the measures required by law to protect streams from their water-greedy trees. In his efforts to conserve black rhinos, he also spoke out against the careless attitude of some national parks employees’ towards them.

Lucky’s sense of purpose, focus, imagination, planning, passion, financial management and ability to get things done ensured that almost everything he put his mind to, he accomplished. In the words of Danie, he was

“a true conservationist”, while renowned rhino conservationist Dr Joseph Okori described him as “a man with a passion, a purpose and a vision”.

Lucky loved all animals and enjoyed the company of many German shepherd dogs over the years, but in the last six years he and Kobi developed an extra special bond. Kobi never left Lucky’s side, and his devotion to Lucky was precious. (See colour plates: page viii).



We say farewell to our conservation friends and colleagues who have passed away in 2018 and 2019. (See Obituaries on pp. 148-152)

Above. Figure 1. Dr Dame Daphne Sheldrick DBE (Courtesy of Angela Sheldrick)

Below left. Figure 2. Lucky Mavrandonis (Courtesy of Melanie Shepherd)

Below right. Figure 3. Philippe Bouché (Courtesy of © F.D./dhnet.be)

